

**Framing a Nigerian Ecotheology:
From a Contemporary Christian Eschatological Perspective**

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Introduction

Growing up in Nigeria brought me face to face with massive and unabated ecological devastation, particularly in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria where the main wealth of that blessed country comes from. Petroleum exploration, resource control and wealth distribution remain ongoing concerns in such a supposedly wealthy country, exacerbated by persistent environmental degradation and severe harm to the living conditions as well as the livelihood of the populace inhabiting the badly-hit Niger Delta region. These problems have not yet received adequate and effective solutions. Perhaps, the depths of the malaise have not been well-appreciated as ought.

Unfortunately, this problem did not just begin with the discovery of oil in Nigeria which was in the 1950s neither is it even limited to Nigeria. There is a universal ecological crisis that has risen to a level of global emergency because creation has been compromised. Throwing more light on this, Steven Bouma-Prediger adjudges that our contemporary scene is daily “confronted with an ecological crisis that, like a crescendo, is growing to unimaginable and genuinely frightening proportions.”¹ The plight of our earthly home is worsening with “global warming, holes in the ozone layer, toxic wastes, oil spills, acid rain, drinking water contamination, overflowing landfills, topsoil erosion, species extinction, destruction of rainforests, leakage of nuclear waste, lead poisoning, desertification, smog” and the greenhouse effect.² This spate of ecological onslaught also extends to “human and cultural degradation.”³ However, it is disheartening that Christianity is being held responsible for our current ecological degradation. Bouma-Prediger

¹ Steven Bouma-Prediger, *The Greening of Theology: The Ecological Models of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Joseph Sittler, and Jürgen Moltmann*, American Academy of Religion Academy Series ; No. 91 (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1995), 1.

² Bouma-Prediger, 1–2.

³ Bouma-Prediger, 2.

offers four reasons being adduced to in this sentence passed on Christianity chiefly based on its ideological disposition. First is the *Weltanschauung* of monotheism which commands humankind to dominate and subdue creation as inferred in Genesis 1:28. Another argument is the Christian dualism of soul and body, sacred and secular, spiritual and material which denigrates the created world. Still, a third criticism is directed at Christian eschatology which is perceived to be inadequate for earthkeeping in its promise of the *Parousia* ushering in a new mode of existence. Furthermore, he alludes to the claims of Lynn White, Jr., lambasting Christianity for having “made possible the growth of modern science and technology, which in turn led to uncontrolled power over nature and the current ecological crisis.”⁴

These discussions highlight a deeper relationship between religion and ecology than ordinarily assumed as well as interrogate the relationship between doctrine and conduct in our society both historically and currently. How has religion contributed to the ecological crisis? What can religion contribute to the solution? Does religion still hold sway on humanity today? Are all religious precepts followed or just a few? Is Christianity alone in this religious ecological searchlight? Could any other factors be driving this crisis? How may this trend be reversed, or at least halted? What can other factors contribute towards resolving the problem? The four chapters of this thesis investigate these issues in due sequence.

The first chapter serves mostly as a historical evaluation of the subject matter. Fifty years ago, Lynn White declared Christianity as the cause of our ecological crisis. Although the different world cultures and religions have their share in this ecological obliviousness, reactions trailing White’s 1967 five-page article, *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis*, have focused largely on the ecological charge against the Judeo-Christian tradition. The flurry of scholarly

⁴ Bouma-Prediger, 3–4.

engagements gave rise to different fields of ecological investigation which intersect with religion, especially ecological theology. However, in its inchoate rush to stem the tide of ecological destruction, ecotheology seemed to dwell more on the non-human aspects of the ecological crisis. The chapter also brings into focus three human-creation paradigms: dominion, care and community of creation.

Advocating for ecological redress, but pushing back against the one-sided tendency of ecological theology, Pope Francis published his monumental encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, in 2015, calling for the care of humanity also as part of care for God's creation. *Laudato Si'* systematizes the Catholic response to the ecological crisis by advocating for an integral ecology, inviting us to listen to the cry of the earth as well as the cry of the poor. In the second chapter of this work, therefore, I argue that this is the core of a Catholic ecotheology, which calls attention to both the devastation of creation and the devastation of humanity because it is the same forces exploiting God's good creation that are also perpetuating the unjust social structures keeping fellow human beings below desirable standards, both internationally and internally.

Furthermore, I do a practical theology by situating my research within the Nigerian existential situation, bringing ecotheology into dialogue with the ecological devastation going on in my dear country for so long. The Nigerian ecological situation has often been tackled from the economic, political, cultural and social standpoints, but seldom has it been addressed from a theological framework. Hence, in the third chapter of this research, I apply this practical theology to my oil-rich Nigerian situation where oil exploration has brought about these two ills: the devastation of both creation and humanity in the Niger Delta; framing a proper Nigerian ecotheology to both educate and stem the tide of destruction. My goal is restoring a flourishing community of God's

creation, especially the universal promotion of the dignity of the *imago Dei*, irrespective of its accidental categories.

Finally, I explore the contemporary debate about the future of creation, in line with Ernst Conradie's theory that "an ecological theology that cannot do justice to salvation and to creation is fatally flawed,"⁵ which led him to investigate what is to be saved and what creation is to be saved from, in view of the eschatological completion, fulfillment and consummation of creation. Thus in chapter four, I bring ecotheology into conversation with eschatology, investigating the future of creation, and what the consummation of creation at the *parousia* entails, against the prevailing Christian soteriology which saw to the elevation of the soul as the object of salvation, over and against the rest of creation, which God found to be good and for which He sent his son into the world (cf. John 3.16: For God so loved the *world* – not humanity alone). I investigate the theme of cosmic redemption in line with the biblical imaginations of a new creation. This field is still a developing line of necessary contemporary engagement, still very new in Africa and almost non-existent in Nigeria. My goal, therefore, is to bring the gospel of creation care to my country Nigeria, because we cannot truly care for creation without caring for humanity and vice versa, both of which are lacking in my dear country. This is part of earnest contributions to put an end to exploitation, oppression and wars, in Nigeria, Africa and the world at large. Bearing in mind the foregoing, therefore, this thesis undertakes to answer the question: What are the ecotheological implications and commitments in mapping a greener Nigeria through a contemporary Christian eschatological lens?

⁵ Ernst M. Conradie, "What Is the Place of the Earth in God's Economy? Doing Justice to Creation, Salvation and Consummation," in *Christian Faith and the Earth: Current Paths and Emerging Horizons in Ecotheology*, ed. Ernst M. Conradie et al. (London, UK ; New York, NY: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 75.

1. Chapter One: Ecotheology: Genesis, Development and Prospects

“In the beginning,” as the story of humankind is introduced in Genesis 1:1, God created the universe. Several things stand out in this biblical narrative of creation. God is transcendent, and He alone has absolute dominion over the universe, His creation. There are two accounts of the creation, however, with different nuances as well. The first account is the Priestly account (Genesis 1:1 – 2:4a), while the Yahwist account runs from Genesis 2:4b – 3:24. These accounts (Genesis 1 – 3) make up a unit as the account of creation, and together with the larger corpus of Genesis 1 – 11, form the account of the origins.⁶

Although it is startling to note that “there is no single theology of creation in the Old Testament,”⁷ as different books of the Old Testament offer different perspectives of the doctrine of creation, Genesis stands out in its portrayal of how the world and humanity came into being. In its creation accounts, God both creates and orders the universe, but gives a special charge to humanity, the crown of creation. Humankind is elevated to the status of a *creature creator*. Unfortunately, one of the first things humanity creates and continues to do is humankind’s own ruin; but not just ruin – humanity has a tremendously positive side as well. From the biblical theology of creation, as has influenced the religious traditions which adhere to the truths contained therein, two motifs seem to stand forth: image and dominion.

The Priestly account of Genesis 1:1 – 2:4a has rather lofty notions of human beings, fuelling a deep sense of anthropocentrism. Creation takes place in six chronological days, with humankind coming in on the sixth and final day, and God rests on the seventh day. God makes humankind, male and female, in His own image and likeness (Genesis 1:26) and commands thus, in verse 28:

⁶ Claus Westermann, *Creation* (London: SPCK, 1974), 17.

⁷ Richard J. Clifford and John J. Collins, eds., *Creation in the Biblical Traditions*, Catholic Biblical Quarterly 24 (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1992), 15.

“Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”⁸ More so, Genesis 1:31 emphasizes that “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.”

Nevertheless, image and dominion are not the only creation motifs the bible offers. Genesis further offers the motifs of stewardship and community. The creation story begins with the Priestly account which seems to use dominion language, although this mandate does not suggest violence or destruction. However, the Yahwistic account tones it down with its preference for the language of stewardship. We see this in the Yahwistic account of Genesis 2:4b – 3:24 which has a more ecological rendering. Humankind is the first act of God’s creation after which God proceeds to create the entire universe as we have it. God puts the human being in the garden to serve it but forbids humankind to eat of the tree of good and evil. Furthermore, God seeks a partner for the man⁹ in this task and forms the animals, bringing them to the man to name. Even though both the man and the rest of the animals are made from the same matter out of the ground, only the man does God breathe the breath of life into his¹⁰ nostrils. Be that as it may, finding none a suitable partner for the man, God makes a woman out of the man’s ribs: “Then the man said, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken’” (Genesis 2:23).

⁸ Unless otherwise stated, all scriptural quotations are taken from Walter J Harrelson, *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Nashville, Tenn: Abingdon Press, 2003).

⁹ I use the term “man” here advisedly as a gender-specific term.

¹⁰ See note 4.

At the heart of the Judeo-Christian cosmology lie these two apparently different accounts of creation reported in Genesis. Intervening in the ensuing ecological impasse, Theodore Hiebert argues that:

In this story of creation, the Yahwist places the human in the opposite position in the world when compared to the Priestly account. The human being is not made in God's image but, rather, out of earth...by being made out of the fertile land, humans have the same status as all other life, since God brings both plants (2:9) and animals (2:19) to life out of this same fertile land.¹¹

Quite adeptly, he recognizes the interrelatedness and interdependence of all creation which Genesis teaches, and which is founded properly on the Trinitarian origin of creation, what we may call the *perichoresis of the ecosystem*.

This strong concept of interrelatedness rings true with our contemporary concept of ecosystems, communities of life in which humans do not exist over and against nature but in which they are a part of a web where living organisms each occupy essential niches or roles and are dependent upon one another for survival.¹²

Not done, Hiebert leaves us a great synthesis of both biblical traditions:

Scripture thus gives us two visions of ourselves in the world. Both believe this world is our true home. And both define the first and primary human vocation as our responsibility to this world. One emphasizes our distinctiveness and our power in the world. It identifies our first responsibility as the exercise of the power God delegates to us to insure that everything God made good flourishes. The other vision emphasizes our interrelatedness with the world and with all of its life and our smallness in the world. It identifies our first responsibility to serve creation, to align our behavior with its own limits. Within the serious crisis in which we now find ourselves, we must use our own science and our own wisest judgment to decide when we must step forward, like the Priestly writer, to intervene to repair and to save nature from our harm, and when we must step back, like the Yahwist, to allow nature to flourish and to bring our lives within those limits.¹³

¹¹ Theodore Hiebert, "Reclaiming the World: Biblical Resources for the Ecological Crisis," *Interpretation* 65, no. 4 (2011): 350, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002096431106500402>.

¹² Hiebert, 350.

¹³ Hiebert, 352.

In addition, John Sachs makes a very interesting analysis of these two creation accounts in Genesis as the first account highlights the dignity and dominion of humankind over creation but the second buttresses the cultivation and care of creation. Beginning with the second account, he writes:

Only then, with a human creature capable of tilling the ground (2:5) does God plant a garden and place the first human in it to tend it (2:15). How different from the Priestly account, in which the world in all its diversity is prepared for humanity and placed at its disposal! Like the Priestly writer, the Yahwist also indicates the special status of the human creature as the one who has the right to name the animals. But here the order and perspective are reversed. The text seems to say that God prepared for the abundant earth which was to be created, by first creating all that was necessary for its fruitfulness and well-being. Seen in this way, the earth is not simply created for humankind but humankind is created for the earth.¹⁴

Sachs contests that “the Yahwist image of gardening challenges false notions of God’s dominion and the human patterns of both domination (‘If God is in charge and has given me charge, then I can do what I please’) and indifference (‘If God is in charge, I don’t have to worry; it doesn’t matter what I do’).”¹⁵ There is no gainsaying that these two opposing accounts of creation have been the crux of recent ecological debates bordering on humanity, religion and creation. Hence, Celia Deane-Drummond recognizes three models of creation as anthropocentric, hierarchical and ecological.¹⁶

In the same vein, the philosophical anthropologist Battista Mondin would divide our concerns into three historical phases: cosmocentric, theocentric and anthropocentric. Ancient civilizations had a cosmocentric perspective that saw humankind in terms of adherence to the workings of the cosmos. Later on, Christian Patristic and Medieval thought developed a theocentric

¹⁴ John Randall Sachs, *The Christian Vision of Humanity: Basic Christian Anthropology*, Zacchaeus Studies (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 22.

¹⁵ Sachs, 23.

¹⁶ Celia Deane-Drummond, *Ecology in Jürgen Moltmann’s Theology* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2016).

understanding of reality, with God as the paradigm. However, modern thought came to an anthropocentric perception of the world whereby humankind would be highlighted as the measure of all things, with the rest of the world at humanity's disposal.¹⁷ That remained the case until about five decades ago when human consciousness entered the *green age*.

a. Conceptualization: The Ecological Turn

The twentieth century saw the emergence of academic fields dealing with theological considerations of ecological crisis, investigating causes and offering recommendations. Ecotheology, environmental ethics, religion and ecology, green theology and other related fields developed within the second half of the century. Pursuing a systematic theology of creation, ecotheology is a recently developed constructive branch of theology which deals with the relationship of theology to ecology. As a Christian ecological theology, it critiques the role of Christianity, directly or indirectly, in our current ecological crises as well as engages the Christian tradition in ways of curbing the contemporary ecological menace. This is captured in Ernst Conradie's definition of Christian ecotheology as the "attempt to retrieve the ecological wisdom embedded in the Christian tradition as a response to ecological destruction and environmental injustices."¹⁸ Indeed, it is the "theology that focuses on the inter-relationships of religion and nature, particularly in light of environmental concerns."¹⁹ It is a reaction to the perceived anthropocentrism of the Judeo-Christian traditions. The response of ecotheology addresses the notions of *imago Dei*, dominion/exploitation, stewardship, eco-responsibility and

¹⁷ Battista Mondin, *Philosophical Anthropology: Man, an Impossible Project?*, Subsidia Urbaniana 6 (Bangalore: Published for Pontificia Universitas Urbaniana by Theological Publications in India, 1985), 14.

¹⁸ Ernst M. Conradie, "Contemporary Challenges to Christian Ecotheology: Some Reflections on the State of the Debate after Five Decades," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 147 (November 2013): 107.

¹⁹ Martinus P. de Wit, "Christ-Centred Ethical Behaviour and Ecological Crisis: What Resources Do the Concepts of Order in Creation and Eschatological Hope Offer?/Christosentriese Etiese Gedrag En Ekologiese Krisis: Watter Hulpbronne Bied Die Konsepte van Orde in Die Skepping En Eskatologiese Hoop?," *Koers* 78, no. 1 (January 1, 2013): 4, <https://doi.org/10.4102/koers.v78i1.46>.

human/nature dualism.²⁰ Hence, ecotheology straddles the fields of systematic theology and moral theology, while intersecting with other major branches of theology such as eschatology, soteriology and practical theology.

The ecological turn which has ensued in recent times adopts three basic methodological approaches to the study of religion and ecology, identified by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim as “retrieval, reevaluation, and reconstruction.”²¹ This builds upon the “intrinsic value theory” of creation, maintaining that God pronounced creation good, as Genesis affirms after each creative act, though with more stress on this intrinsic goodness of God’s creation in Genesis 1:31.²² Pursuing a coherent religious environmentalism, therefore, Bron Taylor has propounded “The Greening of Religion Hypothesis” itself centered on three fact claims, that: “religious ideas are important drivers of environment-impacting behaviors; the world’s religions have ideas that can spur environmentally friendly behavior and increasingly are doing so; and, green religions are critically important in the quest for environmentally sustainable societies.”²³

Ecotheology is a recently developed branch of theology that reflects on the relationship between humankind and the rest of creation. As humanity reveled in anthropocentric advancements and cosmic dominion, the rest of creation groaned under disregard and plunder. Inevitably, anthropocentrism produced a philosophy of ecological destruction.²⁴ As a reaction to this ecological quagmire humanity had driven into, secular environmental concerns gave rise to

²⁰ Wit, 1.

²¹ Mary Evelyn Tucker and John A. Grim, eds., *Religion and Ecology: Can the Climate Change?*, Dædalus, 130.2001,4 (Cambridge, Mass: American Acad. of Arts and Sciences, 2001), 16.

²² Bron Taylor, “The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part One): From Lynn White, Jr and Claims That Religions Can Promote Environmentally Destructive Attitudes and Behaviors to Assertions They Are Becoming Environmentally Friendly,” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 10, no. 3 (August 12, 2016): 286, <https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.v10i3.29010>.

²³ Taylor, 296.

²⁴ Ben A. Minteer and Robert E. Manning, “An Appraisal of the Critique of Anthropocentrism and Three Lesser Known Themes in Lynn White’s ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,’” *Organization & Environment* 18, no. 2 (June 2005): 171, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1086026605276196>.

religious environmentalism in the twentieth century. The five-page article by Lynn White, Jr. published in the *Science* Journal in 1967 became a landmark to this effect. White titled his paper “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis” and accused Christianity as the foundation of this crisis.²⁵ This passionate rebuke from White branding the Judeo-Christian tradition as “the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen,” has been regarded as the “seminal paper in environmental ethics” and also widely acclaimed as setting “the agenda for a future environmental philosophy.”²⁶ Lynn White thus laid the cornerstone in environmental studies as his paper helped to develop the new academic fields of environmental ethics and Christian ecotheology, engaging historians, theologians and philosophers alike.²⁷ While scholars agree that “the emergence of ecotheology is usually associated with the emergence of environmentalism in the 1960s and 1970s and Lynn White’s famous critique that the anthropocentric Judeo-Christian faiths were primarily responsible for the modern ‘ecologic crisis’,”²⁸ it is also a point of consensus that White was not really the first to present such argument.²⁹ Early antecedents of ecotheology have been acknowledged from the biblical roots of Christianity up to Joseph Sittler who was a contemporary of White.³⁰

Bron Taylor is one of the scholars who have unearthed past ecotheological considerations and the influence of some of them such as Albert Schweitzer’s 1923 *The Ethics of Reverence for Life*

²⁵ Lynn White Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155, no. 3767 (March 10, 1967): 1203–7, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203>.

²⁶ J. Baird Callicott, “Environmental Philosophy Is Environmental Activism: The Most Radical and Effective Kind,” in *Environmental Philosophy and Environmental Activism*, ed. Don E. Marietta and Lester Embree (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 31; Minter and Manning, “An Appraisal of the Critique of Anthropocentrism and Three Lesser Known Themes in Lynn White’s ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,’” 171.

²⁷ Minter and Manning, “An Appraisal of the Critique of Anthropocentrism and Three Lesser Known Themes in Lynn White’s ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,’” 163.

²⁸ Celia Deane-Drummond and Rebecca Artinian-Kaiser, eds., *Theology and Ecology across the Disciplines: On Care for Our Common Home*, T & T Clark Religion and the University Series ; v. 5 (London ; New York, NY: T&T Clark, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2018), 2.

²⁹ Taylor, “The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part One),” 268.

³⁰ Conradie, “Contemporary Challenges to Christian Ecotheology,” 106.

on White. Most of these ecotheologically critical scholars were Christians who were concerned about the anthropological perception of Christianity. Schweitzer's eschatological ethics rejects traditions that accorded value only to human beings.³¹ Perry Miller had denounced Christianity's strong anti-nature impulse in 1956, as did Roderick Nash in 1967, the same year White's article appeared, as well as Clarence Glacken in 1967, who also acknowledged the presence of pro-environment themes in the Christian tradition, such as the concept of stewardship.³² More than a century before all these, Ludwig Feuerbach had observed in *The Essence of Christianity* originally published in 1841, that: "Nature, the world, has no value, no interest for Christians. The Christian thinks only of himself and the salvation of his soul."³³ This anthropological assertion echoed David Hume's (1889 [1757]) contention a century before Feuerbach about Christianity as indifferent to this world.³⁴ Among precursors to White, Taylor notes that:

In the United States, also in the mid-nineteenth century, a very different critique of Christianity as a hindrance to environmental concern and action emerged, and it applied equally well to all Abrahamic religions, although Judaism and Islam were usually unmentioned. Some of the critique was indirect, such as that by Ralph Waldo Emerson, who offered an alternative to Christianity, arguing that spiritual truths could be found directly in nature, more so than in the bible and the traditions related to it. Emerson's more naturalistic protégé, Henry David Thoreau, proclaimed that he had nothing to learn from Christian priests but much to learn from Hindu and Native American societies, particularly, what he considered to be the more nature-beneficent spiritualities he thought these traditions expressed and promoted.³⁵

Nevertheless, these historians also had their precursors, according to the claims of Clarence Glacken cited by Bron Taylor, that:

³¹ Taylor, "The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part One)," 273.

³² Taylor, 277.

³³ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, Great Books in Philosophy (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1989), 287.

³⁴ Taylor, "The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part One)," 278.

³⁵ Taylor, 278.

As early as the first century BCE, for example, the Roman epicurean, Titus Lucretius Carus, in his poem *On the Nature of Things*, rejected claims that Earth evidenced a divine, creative, intelligence. He argued, to the contrary, that much of the earth is of no use to humanity (rocks, mountains, scorching deserts and icy wildernesses), and many of its plants and animals are directly harmful to human beings.³⁶

Be that as it may, Taylor avers that it was John Muir who in his book *Cedar Keys* (1997 [1916]), reacting to the Genesis claim about the world been made for man, projected “the first direct and explicit critique of Christian doctrines as leading directly to nature-destroying values and behaviors.... He contended that this view was widespread and pernicious and that it provides theological underpinnings for anthropocentrism and indifference, if not also hostility, to non-human organisms.”³⁷ According to Taylor, this notion was also affirmed by two influential environmentalists, Aldo Leopold (in 1923 and later in 1949) and Rachel Carson (in 1962), who accused Western religions of complicity in the anti-environmental trends identified.³⁸ Furthermore, Walter Lowdermilk in 1940 argued that an ‘11th commandment’ was needed for environmental responsibility. Joseph Sittler, for his part, in 1954 contended that creation belongs to God and not for human exploitation. This found support with Richard Baer who in 1966, reverberated an early Christian ‘intrinsic value’ theory which holds that Genesis emphasized the goodness of all creation, applicable to the entire ecosystem.³⁹

Critically reviewing these antecedents of ecotheology whose development has been widely attributed to Lynn White, Baird Callicott gives White primacy of place while affirming that White did not initiate the critique of Abrahamic religions for promoting environmentally

³⁶ Taylor, 277; Clarence J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (University of California Press, 1967), 68–69.

³⁷ Taylor, “The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part One),” 278.

³⁸ Taylor, 281.

³⁹ Taylor, 285–86.

destructive attitudes.⁴⁰ Taylor corroborates this, buttressing the special influence of White and the context in which he wrote:

His views were noticed and spotlighted in part because of the zeitgeist in which he wrote—a time of war, increasingly obvious environmental degradation and globalization, and an increased exposure in the West to non-Western worldviews. The most important reason, however, was probably because of the prominent venue, *Science*, in which White advanced his argument, which accounts for its widespread dissemination as well as its quick embrace by many readers....

Another reason for the staying power of White's argument was that by the late 1960s others were making assertions that complemented its critique. White was especially important for those who argued that religions originating in Asia and indigenous traditions offered more ecologically beneficent ideals and practices than those found in the Western religious and philosophical traditions.⁴¹

At this point, we shall now examine the contributions of Lynn White which upset the apple cart.

b. The Hornet's Nest: Lynn White

"The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" is a five-paged 1967 article published by Lynn Townsend White Jr. (April 29, 1907 – March 30, 1987) in the March 10, 1967 edition of the *Science* Journal, lamenting "man's unnatural treatment of the environment and its sad results."⁴²

In the research which was first delivered on 26 December 1966, at the Washington meeting of the AAAS (Association of the American Academy of Science) by the UCLA professor of history, White deftly weaves his theory of exploitation powered by religious anthropocentrism.

He remarks that:

God had created Adam and, as an afterthought, Eve to keep man from being lonely. Man named all the animals, thus establishing his dominance over them. God planned all of this explicitly for man's benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's

⁴⁰ Callicott, "Environmental Philosophy Is Environmental Activism."

⁴¹ Taylor, "The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part One)," 277, 287.

⁴² White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," 1203.

purposes. And, although man's body is made of clay, he is not simply part of nature: he is made in God's image.⁴³

Based on this, therefore, White declares that “Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen,” as it “not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.”⁴⁴ Christianity demystified nature, watering down animism in favor of the cult of the saints (including angels and demons), and by methodologically “destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects.”⁴⁵ The implications of this interference are far-reaching: “The spirits in natural objects, which formerly had protected nature from man, evaporated. Man's effective monopoly on spirit in this world was confirmed, and the old inhibitions to the exploitation of nature crumbled.”⁴⁶ It is against this backdrop of infinite license that modern Western science and technology sprouted and flourished, leaving a beleaguered ecosystem in its wake. On the premise that “what we do about ecology depends on our ideas of the man-nature relationship,” White stipulates that “science was cast in a matrix of Christian theology,” as seen in the Christian dogma of creation.⁴⁷ Regrettably, science has progressed only because “we are superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim.”⁴⁸ In Christianity, therefore, lies “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis.” This is White’s core thesis.⁴⁹ The Judeo-Christian tradition has historically promulgated an arrogant humanism as well as an antienvironmental otherworldliness, in particular the Genesis 1 creation story. White acknowledges that the West is becoming increasingly secular but then rebuts that

⁴³ White, 1205.

⁴⁴ White, 1205.

⁴⁵ White, 1205.

⁴⁶ White, 1205.

⁴⁷ White, 1206.

⁴⁸ White, 1206.

⁴⁹ Minter and Manning, “An Appraisal of the Critique of Anthropocentrism and Three Lesser Known Themes in Lynn White’s ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,’” 163, 164.

the Western 'set of basic values' has been deeply configured by the Christian tradition. Paradoxically, his remedy for our ailing universe rests upon the same laboratory that created the virus.

Both our present science and our present technology are so tinctured with orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature that no solution for our ecologic crisis can be expected from them alone. Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not.⁵⁰

White courageously proposes an alternative Christian view to the current ecological crises. His model here is St Francis of Assisi, the humble saint who practiced bio-spirituality. White projects that "we shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man,"⁵¹ and this entails taking a cue from St Francis to undo the permission to exploit nature of Genesis 1 – 3. "The greatest spiritual revolutionary in Western history, Saint Francis, proposed what he thought was an alternative Christian view of nature and man's relation to it: he tried to substitute the idea of the equality of all creatures, including man, for the idea of man's limitless rule of creation."⁵² Not only adopting this Franciscan ecological spirituality, White goes on to propose St Francis as a patron saint for ecologists.⁵³

In a remarkably compelling way, "this most referenced paper emphasized dominion doctrine (sometimes called subjectionism) and precipitated a great flurry of eco-theology and Christian stewardship ethic literature."⁵⁴ This is corroborated by many scholars including Willis Jenkins who acknowledge that indeed, "the fields of environmental ethics and of religion and ecology

⁵⁰ White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," 1207.

⁵¹ White, 1207.

⁵² White, 1207.

⁵³ White, 1207.

⁵⁴ Robert J. Jacobus, "Understanding Environmental Theology: A Summary for Environmental Educators," *The Journal of Environmental Education* 35, no. 3 (2004): 37.

have been shaped by Lynn White Jr.'s thesis that the roots of ecological crisis lie in religious cosmology."⁵⁵ Consequently, over the last half-century, scholars have expounded upon White's ecotheological concerns from different standpoints including religion, culture and other socioeconomic considerations.⁵⁶

i. Religion and Ecology

Lynn White presented a multi-faceted argument but his contention that Christianity has advanced anthropocentric and environmentally destructive attitudes has been the focus of most respondents across the board. His provocative diagnosis and prescription are plausible, controversial and difficult to prove or rebut.⁵⁷ The initial respondents to White's argument were Christians who could be termed indifferent or even hostile to White's concerns about the culpability of religion over the ecological crisis. Another group could be called apologetic. They deduced that Christianity is eco-friendly if properly understood. Still, another group could be labeled confessional/reconstructive. These thinkers acknowledge anti-environmental themes in the Judeo-Christian scriptures and tradition but also highlight environmentally friendly ideas with a view to creatively and ecologically reform their tradition. Bron Taylor labels these claims that religions are becoming more ecologically proactive as 'The Greening of Religion Hypothesis'.⁵⁸

One of the respondents who reacted to Lynn White, Jr. is Professor Richard Clifford, a renowned biblical scholar. Examining Genesis from an ecological perspective, he expounds on three main biblical concerns that White, speaking for many, contends with: human dominion, subduing the

⁵⁵ Willis Jenkins, "After Lynn White: Religious Ethics and Environmental Problems," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 37, no. 2 (June 2009): 283, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9795.2009.00387.x>.

⁵⁶ Elspeth Whitney, "Lynn White Jr.'s 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis' After 50 Years," *History Compass* 13, no. 8 (August 2015): 396–410, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12254>.

⁵⁷ Taylor, "The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part One)," 169.

⁵⁸ Taylor, 268.

earth and naming of the animals. Clifford acquiesces that: “though White overstates matters, it is difficult to deny that many Christians in the West have turned the Genesis texts into a charter for exploitation. But do the texts themselves, texts such as those in Genesis 1, ‘have dominion over the birds of the air,’ ‘fill the earth and subdue it,’ and the naming of the animals in Genesis 2, actually give such a warrant?”⁵⁹

Clifford explains that subduing the land is not a voyage of exploitation but of humble acceptance of the land as a gift from God, while naming the animals by man⁶⁰ buttresses not dominion, but the relational community being formed between them. Furthermore, he asserts that the full meaning of the royal language of dominion is clarified in the later part of the account of the origins which Genesis 1 – 11 portrays as a bloc. In the story of the flood, “Noah’s gathering of the animals to save the species makes clear at last what having dominion over the animals means: seeing to their survival... caring for them as creatures of God’s beautiful cosmos.”⁶¹ Interestingly in Genesis 1-3, God had not given humankind permission to eat animals, just as humankind had also not been allowed to eat of every tree in the garden. However, God does permit the eating of animals in the post-flood account of Genesis 9, even though he still bars human beings from eating the blood of animals. “Human violence to animals was not part of the original preflood plan, nor will it characterize the end time, since the harmony of Genesis 1 is what God intends and will ultimately bring about,” affirms Clifford who explains this change in the original blessing as necessitated by sin.⁶² Nonetheless, this ecological harmony is evident in Genesis 9:9–11 as God enacts a single covenant with both humans and animals and even the earth as covenant partners: “I am now establishing my covenant with you and your descendants

⁵⁹ Richard J. Clifford, “Genesis 1-3: Permission to Exploit Nature?,” *The Bible Today* 26, no. 3 (1988): 133.

⁶⁰ See note 4.

⁶¹ Clifford, “Genesis 1-3,” 135.

⁶² Clifford, 135.

after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark....that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”⁶³ This is God’s covenant with the whole of creation, a biblical foundation for ecological sustainability.

For neglecting these scriptural earth-saving injunctions, some scholars also contend that all three Abrahamic religions are culpable in the ecological crisis, not only Christianity. As Taylor captures it,

Although White focused on Christianity, it is important to note that his critique applies also to Judaism and Islam. All three of these monotheistic, Abrahamic religions, in their orthodox forms at least, have regarded paganism and animism as spiritually dangerous expressions of idolatry that must be resisted if not also violently suppressed.⁶⁴

Nevertheless, a year after White’s essay was published, foremost Muslim intellectual Seyyed Hossein Nasr had rejected a desacralizing and secular worldview, urging people to return to ‘authentic religion’ as the way forward (Nasr 1991 [1968], 1996).⁶⁵

However, as efforts to combat global warming, pollution, climate change and other environmental emergencies, the emerging academic field of ‘Religion and Ecology’ also got intensified in the 1990s. Pope John Paul II gifted the decade with a good ecological start in his 1990 World Day of Peace message identifying the ecological crisis as a moral crisis and a

⁶³ Clifford, 135.

⁶⁴ Taylor, “The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part One),” 275.

⁶⁵ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Encounter of Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*. (London: Allen & Unwin, 1968); Taylor, “The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part One),” 291; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion & The Order of Nature: The 1994 Cadbury Lectures at the University of Birmingham, Religion & The Order of Nature* (Oxford University Press, 1996), <https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195108231.001.0001/acprof-9780195108231>.

common responsibility.⁶⁶ Worthy of mention also is the Forum on Religion and Ecology founded by Yale University professors Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim in 1998. Between 1996 and 1998, Tucker and Grim organized ten ‘Religions of the World and Ecology’ conferences leading to the publication of ten books on world religions including the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), the Asian religions (Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and Shinto), and indigenous religions.⁶⁷ Tucker and Grim came to the modest realization that religions were necessary but not sufficient in themselves to solve the ecological crisis. Hence they also included other dialogue partners in the areas of science, economics and policy. Even while regretting the still gray areas in religions’ handling of our current ecological realities, they are positive about the inroads made so far:

The Harvard project identified seven common values that the world religions hold in relation to the natural world: reverence, respect, reciprocity, restraint, redistribution, responsibility, and restoration. There are clearly variations of interpretation within and between religions regarding these values, which have become latent in the modern period. As religions move toward a broader understanding of their cosmological orientations and ethical obligations, these values are being retrieved and expanded in response to environmental concerns. As this shift occurs— and there are signs it is already happening—religions are calling for *reverence* for the earth and its profound ecological processes, *respect* for earth’s myriad species and an extension of ethics to include all life forms, *reciprocity* in relation to both humans and nature, *restraint* in the use of natural resources combined with support for effective alternative technologies, a more equitable *redistribution* of economic opportunities, the acknowledgment of human *responsibility* for the continuity of life, and *restoration* of both humans and ecosystems for the flourishing of life.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ John Paul II, *The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility : Message of His Holiness Pope John Paul II for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace, 1 January 1990.*, Publication (United States Catholic Conference. Office of Publishing and Promotion Services); No. 332-9 (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1990), §6.

⁶⁷ John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Ecology and Religion*, Foundations of Contemporary Environmental Studies (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2014), 7.

⁶⁸ Grim and Tucker, 8.

Furthermore, the extensive research by Bron Taylor, Gretel Van Wieren and Bernard Daley Zaleha into Lynn White's claims "overturns common misperceptions regarding the role of religion in environmental behaviors."⁶⁹ Their research goes beyond the Abrahamic religions, reviewing also religions originating in Asia and nature-related religions, worldviews and spiritualities outside the world's leading religions. On Asian religious traditions, the research notes that some scholars had earlier affirmed that religions originating in Asia were traditionally greener than their Western counterparts, but recent reviews show that such projections might have been overstated, as there is little evidence to prove so. On the contrary, environmental degradation also went on in Asia as in the West, and the West historically became more environmentally conscious and decidedly proactive before Asia. The research reveals that Asian religious traditions have a wide range of themes toward non-human nature cutting across being beneficent, obscure, indifferent, hostile, domineering and protective. The review upholds neither the West nor Asia as the religious ideal ecologically and calls for more research in this regard.⁷⁰

Be that as it may, White's testimony about the reverential attitude of St Francis of Assisi toward nature indicates that the same Judeo-Christian tradition which has undermined nature could also yield a less domineering attitude towards the rest of creation.⁷¹ Although White's essay requires reassessment and revision due to current scholarship and thinking, the article remains relevant to contemporary discussions on religion and ecology.⁷²

⁶⁹ Bron Taylor, Gretel Van Wieren, and Bernard Daley Zaleha, "The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part Two): Assessing the Data from Lynn White, Jr, to Pope Francis," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 10, no. 3 (August 12, 2016): 306, <https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.v10i3.29011>.

⁷⁰ Taylor, Van Wieren, and Zaleha, "The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part Two)."

⁷¹ Minter and Manning, "An Appraisal of the Critique of Anthropocentrism and Three Lesser Known Themes in Lynn White's 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,'" 164.

⁷² Minter and Manning, 173.

Of what relevance, then, is religion to the field of ecology, and what are the benefits of ecotheology in addressing our contemporary global ecological crises? Dan Spencer ponders over sublime questions integrating the historical and normative dimensions of the field of religion and ecology:

(1) How have religious traditions *historically* shaped how humans view and interact with nature and to what extent, if any, have they contributed to the current eco-crisis? (2) How are religions *currently* responding to the eco-crisis? What assets do they bring and in what ways do they need to be reformed or transformed to successfully contribute?⁷³

Sequel to this endeavor, therefore, Gardner opines that “religious institutions and leaders can bring at least five strong assets to the effort to build a sustainable world: the capacity to shape cosmologies (worldviews), moral authority, a large base of adherents, significant material resources, and community-building capacity.”⁷⁴ As religion is being fingered in the factors that have caused our ecological crisis, are we expecting too much from religion in looking up to religion for ecological remedy? Is religion standing alone in the dock of ecological trial?

ii. Culture and Ecology

Lynn White contends that the Western culture which has been explicitly environmentally destructive is informed by the Christian tradition. This has also seen high scholarly traffic investigating his claims about the relationship between culture and ecology. Lewis W. Moncrief was White’s contemporary and critic who wrote in 1970 in the same *Science* Journal which published White’s original paper. According to Moncrief, he agrees with “White’s statement that ‘Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny – that is, by

⁷³ Dan Spencer, “The Greening of Religion: Insights and Principles for Teaching about Religion and Ecological Sustainability,” *Ometeca*, January 1, 2010, 154, <http://link.galegroup.com.proxy.bc.edu/apps/doc/A293351685/LitRC?sid=googlescholar>.

⁷⁴ Gary Gardner, “Religion and the Quest for a Sustainable World,” *Humanist* 63, no. 2 (2003): 10.

religion.’ However, to argue that it is the primary conditioner of human behaviour toward the environment is much more than the data that he cites to support this proposition will bear.”⁷⁵ Moncrief’s main thrust is that “the Judeo-Christian tradition is only one of many cultural factors contributing to the environmental crisis.”⁷⁶ This is borne out of his investigation of the influence of religious motivation and of economic motivation on other institutions and on each other. The fact that a given culture has fewer constraints against environmental degradation or does not spiritualize natural objects does not mean that it will invariably exploit its natural resources callously. He maintains that no culture has yet overcome the egocentric tendencies of its inhabitants, as human beings continue to seek a better life at the expense of the less-advantaged humans and non-human resources. Moreover, as White also acquiesces, the environmental plunder has been going on since antiquity, among ancient cultures, and thus predates the Judeo-Christian religion.

While not denying the religious roots of the current crisis, Moncrief identifies the culture of upward mobility as “a second variable in analyzing the cultural basis of the United States’ environmental crisis.”⁷⁷ These resources were perceived as inexhaustible and such attitudes produced self-interest are not restricted to any individual culture, though he uses the present American scene as an example:

America is the archetype of what happens when democracy, technology, urbanization, capitalistic mission, and antagonism (or apathy) toward natural environment are blended together. The present situation is characterized by three dominant features that mediate against quick solution to this impending crisis: (i) an absence of personal moral direction concerning our treatment of our natural

⁷⁵ Lewis W. Moncrief, “The Cultural Basis for Our Environmental Crisis: Judeo-Christian Tradition Is Only One of Many Cultural Factors Contributing to the Environmental Crisis,” *Science* 170, no. 3957 (October 30, 1970): 509, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.170.3957.508>.

⁷⁶ Moncrief, 509.

⁷⁷ Moncrief, 510.

resources, (ii) an inability on the part of our social institutions to make adjustments to this stress, and (iii) an abiding faith in technology.⁷⁸

Moncrief contends that the environmental crisis is neither a religious problem nor a problem unique to Western culture. If the environmental problems were uniquely Judeo-Christian or Western, why are other non-Christian and non-Western cultures also experiencing the same problems in various degrees? Different parts of the world did not adopt Christianity in the same degree with which they adopted Western science and technology. These different cultures have their respective elements which also hinder environmental care. In emphasizing the ‘cultural basis for our environmental crisis’ Moncrief concludes that: “The Judeo-Christian tradition has probably influenced the character of each of these forces. However, to isolate religious tradition as a cultural component and to contend that it is the ‘historical root of our ecological crisis’ is a bold affirmation for which there is little historical or scientific support.”⁷⁹

But that is far from saying culture is all environmentally destructive. On the contrary, extant research on culture and ecology shows that culture is also a positive factor in nurturing positive interaction with creation. Indigenous societies often have habitual religion-infused ‘Traditional Ecological Knowledge’ which promotes environmental sustainability.⁸⁰ Rural populations developed multigenerational links to the land on which they depended for survival. They nurtured; they plundered as well. Nonetheless, different cultures have their moral codes which protect creation from unwarranted human actions.⁸¹ Cultural mores keep human interference with the ecosystem including human and non-human aspects at some balance. However, scholars have observed the paucity of decisive data for cultural impact on ecology and as well as the

⁷⁸ Moncrief, 510.

⁷⁹ Moncrief, 511.

⁸⁰ Taylor, “The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part One),” 288.

⁸¹ Minter and Manning, “An Appraisal of the Critique of Anthropocentrism and Three Lesser Known Themes in Lynn White’s ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,’” 169, 172.

diversity of world cultures based on time, space and other peculiarities.⁸² These complications have made respondents acknowledge the need for more research in this regard.

iii. Matters Arising

From the foregoing, scholars have come to view the environmental crises we face as brought about not by religion and/or culture only. Deeper investigations reveal other variables which cannot be neglected in an objective evaluation of the drivers of contemporary ecological crises. Sequel to this, Ben Minteer and Robert Manning aver that there is more to the assumed Western historical origins of our ecological crisis based on ethical, political and scientific factors. They posit that rather than White's perceived monocausal analysis of the roots of the ecological crises, Moncrief offers a more pluralistic and complex understanding of the drivers of environmental degradation.⁸³ But White's analysis is not as simplistic as the Judeo-Christian antienvironmental tirade which most respondents have tended to reduce it to. As such, Minteer and Manning attest to its extensive reach as they identify four key themes in White's essay on which they dwelt: "(a) anthropogenic disturbance and the nature of ecological change; (b) nature, productive work, and human alienation; (c) the antienvironmental implications of democracy; and (d) the perils of the anthropocentric outlook on nature."⁸⁴ Ernst Conradie also supports this line of thought in his study of the relationship between Christian countries and ecological destruction, alleging the Protestant ethic and capitalism as culprits standing in the dock.⁸⁵ Underlying this assessment, especially the second theme covered by White is the notion of dualism between human beings

⁸² Taylor, Van Wieren, and Zaleha, "The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part Two)," 336.

⁸³ Minteer and Manning, "An Appraisal of the Critique of Anthropocentrism and Three Lesser Known Themes in Lynn White's 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,'" 165.

⁸⁴ Minteer and Manning, 166.

⁸⁵ Conradie, "Contemporary Challenges to Christian Ecotheology," 107.

and nature. This has been the springboard of most of humankind's actions on both land and other aspects of the environment, exploiting the land for agriculture and production.⁸⁶

Techno-scientific advancement has reinforced humanity's feeling of entitlement to earth's resources, leading to further alienation between the notions of lordship and stewardship in Genesis 1-2. The result is an enhanced co-creator status upsetting the balance of nature.⁸⁷ However, Minter and Manning further submit that beyond human factors, there are also non-human factors in the chain of ecological degradation. Nature itself undergoes changes that are often destructive and independent of human influence. Their research underscores that:

Humans change and transform environmental systems that are themselves changing and evolving on multiple spatial scales and at different rates of speed. As a result, human-driven changes join a host of natural disturbances (e.g., fire, pests, drought, and floods) that have always worked on and modified ecological systems. Indeed, growing archaeological, historical, and ecological evidence increasingly supports the view that serious and widespread human manipulations of nature—including practices such as the use of fire, forest clearing, hunting, and so on—go deep into our historic and prehistoric pasts (Krech, 1999; Pyne, 1997; Redman, 1999). Among other things, this research shatters cultural myths of the existence of pristine wilderness free of anthropogenic impacts, not to mention the winds of human history more generally (Cronon, 1996; Denevan, 1992; Gomez-Pompa & Kaus, 1992).⁸⁸

In spite of all the shadows highlighted above, there have been positive changes since White's essay appeared. The first Earth Day was held in 1970 and ecology has become more popular, emerging as a political choice. Also, new scholarly fields such as environmental history, environmental ethics, ecotheology as well as religion and ecology have been developed.⁸⁹ Religions, cultures, local communities and policymakers are increasingly becoming more

⁸⁶ Minter and Manning, "An Appraisal of the Critique of Anthropocentrism and Three Lesser Known Themes in Lynn White's 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,'" 168.

⁸⁷ Francisca Chimhanda, "African Theology of Land: A Shona Perspective," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 148 (March 2014): 45.

⁸⁸ Minter and Manning, "An Appraisal of the Critique of Anthropocentrism and Three Lesser Known Themes in Lynn White's 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,'" 167.

⁸⁹ Minter and Manning, 166.

ecologically conscious. Scientific, philosophical and other sociopolitical programs are rife now with respect to ameliorating the ecological crises, reduce climate change, pollution, greenhouse effect, global warming and saving the earth. While we are not yet out of the woods, there is a steady campaign across the board now to stem the tide of ecological devastation. In all these, the influence of White's essay cannot be overemphasized. Hence, Minter and Manning conclude that:

Even if many of White's assumptions and conclusions have been called into question (and occasionally refuted) by subsequent research in the sciences and the humanities, his larger point—that is, that we need to examine the underlying values and philosophical worldviews that motivate human activity in nature as revealed in our cultural and environmental history—remains as significant now as it was in 1967.⁹⁰

Whether one approaches White's claims with refutation, clarifications or affirmation, the introspection he has brought to ecological investigation from a religious perspective would remain an insightful prelude to such discourse. This ecological consciousness would be foundational for subsequent scholars as we see following.

c. Elizabeth Johnson

Elizabeth Johnson comes as a leading contemporary eco-feminist theologian in the United States. Her ecotheology paradoxically stems from the wonder of creation and the waste of the planet.⁹¹ I intend to review her theology of creation in two parts. These reviews are not exhaustive. The first is on evolution and creation which she wrote extensively on, juxtaposing the two notions. The next will be her development of the right paradigm guiding our interaction with creation which she upholds as our ecological vocation. Johnson's works, including their titles, are full of biblical

⁹⁰ Minter and Manning, 172.

⁹¹ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 5.

imagination which she applies so vividly. She argues from human care to creation care. I argue from creation care to human care, and Pope Francis as well does the same.⁹²

i. Evolution

To be complete, a contemporary theology of creation would need to take into account alternative narratives proposing the origin of all things. Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, as a scientific theory of how things came to be. His theory of evolution has since then gained prominent status in discussions on origins and has neither been discarded nor ignored by the intellectual community. Darwin claims that higher beings evolved from lower beings. Variation and adaptability are key to overcoming extinction in what he refers to as “Natural Selection”.⁹³ Setting forth his theory, Darwin states thus:

Although much remains obscure, and will long remain obscure, I can entertain no doubt, after the most deliberate study and dispassionate judgment of which I am capable, that the view which most naturalists entertain, and which I formerly entertained – namely, that each species has been independently created – is erroneous. I am fully convinced that species are not immutable; but that those belonging to what are called the same genera are lineal descendants of some other and generally extinct species, in the same manner as the acknowledged varieties of any one species are the descendants of that species. Furthermore, I am convinced that Natural Selection has been the main but not exclusive means of modification.⁹⁴

Elizabeth Johnson devotes her 2014 work to conducting a dialogue between *The Origin of Species* presented by Darwin and the biblical story of the Creator’s love which Christians profess in the Nicene creed. The title of her work *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* informed

⁹² Johnson, 257.

⁹³ Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, ed. Joseph Carroll (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2003).

⁹⁴ Darwin, 98.

by the biblical book of Job reveals her “starting point and operative approach. ‘Ask the beasts and they will teach you’ (Job 12.7).”⁹⁵

In her appreciation of Darwin’s theory, she writes:

On the Origin of Species is a sustained argument showing that all living beings on Earth are related through common descent from simple ancestors, their diversity explainable as a result of natural processes.... Species originate by the action of natural laws, not supernatural acts of special creation. They change, rather than remain immutable. They branch out geographically from an original ancestor, rather than appear suddenly in different centers of creation. Because extinction breaks the bond of generation, species that disappear never return, rather than showing up in new acts of creation again and again. All living and dead organisms are profoundly related to each other in one grand natural system, rather than being separate creations related directly to the Creator but not to each other.⁹⁶

Johnson goes on to critique the notion of creaturely evolution as the rationale for the origins of all things. She interrogates the evolution theory in its doctrines of chance adaptations and absence of direct design. She draws attention to Darwin’s account of the emergence and extinction of species through random natural selection. For her, a grave difficulty of the theory of evolution lies in its insistence on unpredictable variations of organisms over billions of years, rather than direct divine agency, as behind the world’s design. However, without dismissing evolution, Johnson expresses her conviction that the doctrine of free and empowered creation holds true regardless of the natural world being static or developing: “God’s creative activity brings into being a universe endowed with the innate capacity to evolve by the operation of its own natural powers, making it a free partner in its own creation.”⁹⁷

According to Johnson, the Christian doctrine of creation affirms for all creatures a relationship of origin. She uses the scientific theory of the Big Bang to further prove that the universe began at a

⁹⁵ Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, xv.

⁹⁶ Johnson, 100–101.

⁹⁷ Johnson, 155.

certain moment rather than the steady fluctuation of the evolution theory. Nevertheless, she reconciles both theories, that “the reality of creation would hold true in either case, since whatever the manner in which the present world came into being, it would still be ontologically grounded in God’s creative act.”⁹⁸ As such, the Spirit of God undergirds all creation together in a community of love.⁹⁹ She tells us further how this creation exists perpetually.

ii. Community of Creation: From Pyramid to Circle

Johnson dwelt extensively on the Christian doctrine of creation, retrieving the traditional theology of creation, proposing an ecological morality as well as offering new paradigms for contemporary ecotheology. She draws a lot of insights from the Christian creed, and re-echoes Irenaeus’ statement that *Gloria Dei vivens in homo*, meaning that “the glory of God is the human being fully alive.”¹⁰⁰ In line with classical theology, Johnson affirms three senses of creation as *creatio originalis*, *creatio continuo* and *creatio nova*, meaning the original creation by God in the beginning, the continuous creation by God in the present here and now, and the new creation by God at the redeemed end of time.¹⁰¹ She suggests that the notion of evolution and emerging life forms could be interpreted under the doctrine of continuous creation.¹⁰² She explains this as the incomprehensible action of the *perichoresis* of the Trinity and the presence of the self-communicating love of God in the world. She asserts that early Christian theology had a tripartite structure of God, humanity and the universe but Hellenistic influence led to diminished attention on the natural world as reality was divided into two separate spheres, matter and spirit, with spirit

⁹⁸ Johnson, 217–18.

⁹⁹ Johnson, 123.

¹⁰⁰ Saint Irenaeus, *St. Irenaeus of Lyons against the Heresies*, Ancient Christian Writers; No. 55, 64, No. 65 (New York, N.Y.: Paulist Press ; Newman Press, Paulist Press, 1992), sec. 4.20.7; 3.20.2; 5.3; Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 157.

¹⁰¹ Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 123, 212.

¹⁰² Johnson, 133.

elevated over matter. This was also translated into the human body being perceived as less valuable than the soul. She further identifies this hierarchical dualism extended to the social hierarchy of men holding sway over women.¹⁰³

From the foregoing, Johnson advocates for ecological morality. Highlighting the Greek etymology of ecology as *oikos*, that is, household or home, she drives an ecological awareness which underscores the universe as our home.¹⁰⁴ She cites the verdict of the World Council of Churches that: “The stark sign of our times is a planet in peril at our hands.”¹⁰⁵ She emphasizes the deep connection between ecological devastation and social injustice. She would pre-empt *Laudato Si*’s rebuke of global patterns of profit which ruin local communities and pollute the environment through extraction of natural resources. The papal Encyclical would lament both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor. As Johnson puts it, “ravaging of people and ravaging of the land go hand in hand.”¹⁰⁶ Deforestation, oil spills, large-scale development projects as well as unethical dumping of toxic wastes contribute to damaging the ecosystem, impoverishing human livelihood, perishing of species and compromising biodiversity. Her feminist analysis also identifies the toxic effects of these on the reproductive abilities of poor women as well as the high rate of infant mortality in poor nations due to lack of clean water, poor healthcare delivery and other basic amenities. She vehemently decries environmental racism. Environmental racism refers to the deliberate and systematic scheme of pushing racial and ethnic minorities towards areas with higher exposure to industrial waste, long-term pollution and natural disasters, as well

¹⁰³ Johnson, 125–26.

¹⁰⁴ Johnson, 5.

¹⁰⁵ Canberra Assembly (A.C.T.) World Council of Churches, “Giver of Life Sustain Your Creation,” in *Signs of the Spirit: Official Report, Seventh Assembly, Canberra, Australia, 7-20 February 1991*, ed. Michael Kinnamon (Geneva : Grand Rapids: WCC Publications ; Eerdmans, 1991), 55; Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 6.

¹⁰⁶ Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 6; Francis, *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home: Encyclical Letter* (Our Sunday Visitor, 2015), §49.

as the languid government and corporate response towards such groups in the aftermath of these.¹⁰⁷

These environmental afflictions and social inequalities led Thomas Berry, one of the most respected environmental scholars, to advocate for what “is now being called eco-justice, where social and ecological concerns are seen as deeply intertwined.”¹⁰⁸ After all, the story of the universe is in reality our personal story.¹⁰⁹ Both the earth story and the human story are but a single story that can be told in a variety of ways. For Johnson, therefore, we cannot place a choice between social justice and ecojustice as some suggest; they are not mutually exclusive propositions. She maintains that “social injustice and ecological degradation are two sides of the same coin, lack of respect for human life.”¹¹⁰ This corroborates Pope John Paul II’s declaration of the present ecological destruction as a moral problem.¹¹¹ Ernst Conradie would call the present crisis an ecological sin. Johnson uses the new terms coined by ethicists to name the ongoing sin against creation: *ecocide*; *biocide*; *geocide*. She actually calls it desecration and sacrilege.¹¹² She passionately repeats the call of Moltmann that we must fight against the symbols of death enforced by the unjust sociopolitical forces of poverty, war and the systematic destruction of creation.¹¹³

Elizabeth Johnson finds the human destruction of the ecosystem ironic and unbecoming of our *homo sapiens* designation. She insists that on the contrary, we should care for the living world

¹⁰⁷ Hannah Murphy, “On the Intersections of Environmental Racism & the Black Lives Matter Movement,” *The Environmental Eagle*, October 2020, 6.

¹⁰⁸ Thomas Berry, *The Christian Future and the Fate of Earth*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, Ecology and Justice (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2009), 40.

¹⁰⁹ Berry, 41.

¹¹⁰ Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 256.

¹¹¹ John Paul II, *The Ecological Crisis*.

¹¹² Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 256.

¹¹³ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992); Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 189.

and protect biodiversity. First, it is for human benefit both present and future. Again, it is an altruistic recognition of the importance and inherent value of the natural world itself.¹¹⁴ She recognizes that “many human beings in our day, of course, are intensely concerned about the fate for the natural world not only out of self-interest, fair enough in itself, but also because of the world’s beauty and intrinsic worth.”¹¹⁵ Berry coined the term “Ecozoic” in the 1980s to denote the emerging period in which humankind would reinvent their creative and sacred orientation to Earth.¹¹⁶

One distinctive contribution Elizabeth Johnson brings to ecotheology is delineating a working paradigm for envisioning human beings in relation to the natural world. She interprets two key biblical paradigms with their various connotations – the paradigm of dominion and the paradigm of the community of creation. Cautious not to assert that the Bible is unequivocally “green” at first reading, she adopts the approach of phenomenological hermeneutics in retrieving the ecological resources of the Judeo-Christian tradition. She states that:

Those who find in the text today an unalloyed ecological sensibility see just as simplistic as critics who dismiss scripture out of hand because of the mandate to dominion. The Bible is a complex set of works, written over centuries in different genres with various intents. The crucial factor is hermeneutical, how it is interpreted. As the history of interpretation makes clear, the presuppositions that one brings to reading the text and the method one uses will unlock different shades of meaning. At times a new question will unleash new insight.¹¹⁷

Johnson contextualizes the dominion model of Genesis 1:28 as indicative of the predatory ancient world which posed a danger to human survival, unlike the contrary situation today with human activity threatening nature’s survival. This predation interpretation of the dominion

¹¹⁴ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), 208.

¹¹⁵ Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 255.

¹¹⁶ Thomas Berry, *Selected Writings on the Earth Community*, Modern Spiritual Masters Series (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2014), 136.

¹¹⁷ Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 261–62.

paradigm finds support in the Genesis 1 precedence in time of the rest of creation before humans, and the intimidation humans faced amidst the uncontrollable forces of nature. Another interpretation Johnson offers is the representative participation which was the custom of the ancient royal court. In this sense, humans would be the Creator's delegates to see to the flourishing of all creation, human and non-human. This does not give humans the permission to dominate, exploit or harm other creatures, but to see to their survival, as she cites Richard Clifford's ecological exegesis of Genesis 6 where Noah saves even species that were apparently of no use to human beings.¹¹⁸ In the same vein, Johnson examines the more recent idea of stewardship which she regards as "restoring the balance upset by grossly egotistic interpretations of dominion."¹¹⁹ Although stewardship theology has been developed by contemporary ecological scholars to encourage responsible "creation care," Johnson still faults the stewardship interpretation as being part of the dominion model for establishing a vertical top-down relationship, with humans at the top, independent from other creatures.¹²⁰ She rejects the dominion paradigm which irrespective of refinements and reinterpretations still undermines the interconnectedness, interdependence and reciprocal interaction between humankind and other species.

Responding to Lynn White while highlighting Pope Francis' sermon at his 2013 inaugural mass as Pontiff,¹²¹ Johnson presents a different biblical model of the relationship between human beings and the created world which she terms "the community of creation paradigm,"¹²² based on their common origin in the one Creator. This alternative narrative is favored by the second

¹¹⁸ Johnson, 264.

¹¹⁹ Johnson, 265.

¹²⁰ Johnson, 266.

¹²¹ Johnson, 260.

¹²² Johnson, 267.

creation story (Genesis 2) as well as the psalms, prophets and wisdom literature. Their solidarity stems from being all alike made out of dust and receiving the breath of life from the same Creator, and being placed in the same abode with the divine mandate “to till and keep it” in a mutual pattern of creaturely relationship and companionship.¹²³ Hence, she calls for ecological conversion¹²⁴ and emphasizes that “human beings and other species have more in common than what separates them.”¹²⁵ Her theology of community is based on this intrinsic relationship of origin for all creatures, all sustained in life alike by one Creator, as well as beleaguered by mortality as a natural end.¹²⁶ This theocentric view of creaturely kinship overturns the erstwhile anthropocentric mandate of dominion which had informed the callous use and abuse of the earth. In redefining the traditional understanding of the human-creature relationship from a pyramidal to a circular model, Johnson clarifies that this relationship of communion does not diminish the uniqueness of the human species, but rather maintains the difference of each species in a wider whole. With this conviction, she concludes that: “Repositioning the human species within the community of creation centered on the living God and reconceiving our identity primarily along the lines of kinship rather than rule opens a promising new avenue for religious self-understanding and sound practice.”¹²⁷ This she calls our ecological vocation, and “the beasts ask of us no less.”¹²⁸ If only we could ask the beasts!

d. Ernst Conradie

Ernst Conradie is rated the leading voice in ecotheology out of Africa. He is also one of the most widely read scholars in America in the field. This research explores the terrain he maps for

¹²³ Johnson, 263–64.

¹²⁴ Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 196.

¹²⁵ Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 268.

¹²⁶ Johnson, 189.

¹²⁷ Johnson, 268.

¹²⁸ Johnson, 286.

Christian ecotheology and also discusses the challenges to Christian ecotheology Conradie examines half a century after its inception. His recent work *Redeeming Sin? Social Diagnostics Amid Ecological Destruction* (2017) reveals a thread that runs through his theology of creation, that the root cause of global environmental destruction is sin.¹²⁹ He recaptures five of the approaches to sin from classical theology and applies them to environmental destruction. Of the seven deadly sins listed in Christian catechesis as wrath, avarice, sloth, pride, lust, envy and gluttony, he identifies these: the sin of sloth or backwardness which is a moral failure arising from lack of education and development; the sin of pride which anthropocentrism represents; the sin of greed or avarice resulting in consumerism; the sin of power or wrath giving rise to violence and domination in the name of difference; and the sin of the privation of the good manifested in the human alienation from the rest of nature. All these manifestations of sin vitiate the community of life.¹³⁰ This forms the fulcrum of his ecotheology, and he also applies his root cause analysis to ecological destruction in Africa. I find that his insightful contribution to ecotheology.

i. Mapping the Terrain for Christian Ecotheology

In mapping the ecotheology terrain, Ernst Conradie states that it had already gained momentum in the 1970s but acknowledges that some scholars link its origins to Lynn White's essay.¹³¹ He pictures the ecotheology landscape over the past fifty years as dotted with shifting horizons both spatially and temporally. These shifting vistas reflect the frames of reference of ecotheology, including evolutionary change; aggravated environmental problems – climate change, rising CO₂

¹²⁹ Ernst M. Conradie, *Redeeming Sin?: Social Diagnostics amid Ecological Destruction*, Religious Ethics and Environmental Challenges (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2017), 11.

¹³⁰ Conradie, 12.

¹³¹ Ernst M. Conradie, ed., "The Journey of Doing Christian Ecotheology: A Collective Mapping of the Terrain," *Theology* 116, no. 1 (2013): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571X12461232>.

levels; developments in the nature of environmental discourse; shifts in the global economy; cultural change; transformation of ecclesial traditions; shifts in theological reflection.¹³² He uses the metaphor of navigation with several points of departure and various route intersections to frame ecotheology. There are several intersecting journeys with various maps highlighting different routes. Although these maps are not yet available since there is no known system of coordinates, “mapping (or navigating through) the terrain is to understand the various points of departure for such a journey, together with the presuppositions, motivations, aims and methods that are playing a role in this regard, and the changing vistas and horizons that are experienced en route.”¹³³

For Conradie, ecotheology is a collective journey charting a way out of the unacceptable present with its dominant problems of anthropocentrism, alienation and violence/ domination. He identifies the sources of inspiration for this journey as Scripture, tradition, reason and experience, likening them to different tributaries flowing into one river, but notes that sacred texts, traditions, thinking skills and contextual analysis do not all have the same weight.¹³⁴ From these, he maintains that the roots of the current ecological crisis are sin, the industrial revolution, science and technology, modernity, domination in the name of difference, cosmological and metaphysical dualism, injustice, religion and social order. Interestingly, he claims that the destination of ecotheology is eschatology.¹³⁵

Ernst Conradie brilliantly offers a dual vision for Christian ecotheology as a reciprocal engagement between Christian theology and ecology based on hermeneutic analysis, reformation

¹³² Conradie, 4–5.

¹³³ Conradie, 6.

¹³⁴ Conradie, 11.

¹³⁵ Conradie, 8.

of tradition as well as context, and this goes beyond religion and ecology.¹³⁶ His twofold agenda for ecotheology features the Christian critique of the economic and cultural patterns underlying ecological destruction and an ecological critique of Christianity.¹³⁷ Because of this twofold critique that ecotheology offers, making the renewal and reformation of Christianity its most significant contribution to the Christian tradition, ecotheology necessarily permeates every aspect of theology. It offers the theological explanation needed to accomplish the ecological reformation of the Christian heritage, providing the theological, ethical and pragmatic rationale for environmental stewardship and Christian earthkeeping.¹³⁸ Above all, Conradie's delineation of Christian ecotheology as distinctive of the Christian tradition's ecotheological reflection brings home and clearly goes beyond the mapping of religion and ecology by Bron Taylor who holds that:

From an etic (outsider/analytic) perspective, the religion and ecology movement can be viewed as a religious revitalization movement as well as a new, ecumenical, religious movement. It is a revitalization movement in that it seeks to return religious people to valuable, if supposedly forgotten roots, in this case the ones that enjoin reverent care for nature and all living things. It is a new religious movement, and an ecumenical one at that, because it seeks to uncover and blend environment-related insights believed to be longstanding and latent in the world's religious patrimony, while grafting on scientific understandings as well. As reflected in the Earth Charter initiative, which entwines religions, science, and the environmental cause, the religion and ecology movement could even be seen as promoting a new, religio-scientific civil earth religion or planetary civilization (Deudney 1995, 1998; Deudney and Mendenhall 2016; Taylor 2010a; 2010b: 180-99).¹³⁹

Given Conradie's dual-faceted framework for ecotheology, it is worth interrogating further the impact of recent ecological insights on contemporary Christian theology as well as the contributions of Christian theology to current ecological discourse.

¹³⁶ Conradie, 14.

¹³⁷ Conradie, "Contemporary Challenges to Christian Ecotheology," 107; Conradie, "The Journey of Doing Christian Ecotheology," 11.

¹³⁸ Conradie, "Contemporary Challenges to Christian Ecotheology," 109.

¹³⁹ Taylor, "The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part One)," 296.

ii. Challenges to Christian Ecotheology After Five Decades

Ernst Conradie assesses the challenges facing Christian ecotheology fifty years after. Conradie highlights six challenges Christian ecotheology has been grappling with over the decades. These are: the ecological significance of God's transcendence; how to avoid a dualist anthropology; reconciling the doctrine of creation and the doctrine of salvation; overcoming an escapist eschatology; a renaissance of Trinitarianism to quell the chasm between mainline churches and Pentecostal churches, and between Christology and Pneumatology; and the earthkeeping relationship between the Christian tradition and other faith traditions, given the understanding that Christian ecotheology alone cannot resolve these crucial ecological problems.

Sequel to these challenges, he evaluates the prospects ahead under three key parameters, viz: "a) Has Christian ecotheology made a difference in addressing common ecological problems?, b) Could Christian ecotheology make such a difference? and c) Can Christian ecotheology come to terms with its own internal tensions?"¹⁴⁰ The first question leads him to reflect on the complicity of Christianity in capitalism (upward social mobility) and evangelicalism (prosperity gospel) which form the rationale for White's verdict.

In the second prospect, Conradie is asking the question which is my key preoccupation in this thesis: "Can the gospel change the world?" This turns his gaze to climate change as a moral problem and a spiritual problem. For him, the solution to the problem of climate change lies in inducing social change. He acknowledges the failure of all the techniques for this including education, marketing, management, punishment, appeal to a sense of responsibility, prophetic warnings and threats, as well as appeals to future dreams and aspirations. He thus emphasizes the

¹⁴⁰ Conradie, "Contemporary Challenges to Christian Ecotheology," 106.

role of religious formation in ushering in a new global ethos, given the political and social inability to bring this about. On the one hand, he is optimistic that the gospel can change the world considering the “numerical strength of Christianity, its regular access to people at the grassroots level, its moral sources, its trusted leadership (at least trusted more than politicians or trade union leaders) and the strong allegiance from its adherents.”¹⁴¹ He understands the Christian contribution in the face of ecological sins as conversion, resurrection, regeneration and transformation. On the other hand, however, he prudently observes that Christian formation is a slow but accumulative process. Quite bleakly, he rules that “we may not be able to rely on Christianity (not to mention Christian ecotheology) to ‘save the planet’. According to the Christian confession, even when the triune God’s only Son was about to be crucified, the Father did not send the Spirit to intervene with a quick-fix solution.”¹⁴²

Furthermore, Conradie sees the third concern with ecotheology in the internal tensions arising from having varieties of geographic and confessional traditions as well as multiple academic specializations and diversity of sources and dialogue partners. From this he reveals four methodological tensions ecotheology contends with, namely: disputes between systematic theologians and bible scholars on the soteriological key to address ecological destruction; debates between systematic theology and applied environmental ethics in bracketing its unique Christian content so as to make the discussion palatable to a wider audience beyond Christianity; tensions between constructive and reconstructive theology regarding the ecological reformation of Christianity, centered on retrieval of its Trinitarian roots versus reinterpretation of Christian symbols; and lastly the divide between ecumenical advocates subsuming Christian ecotheology under ‘ecology and religion’ versus advocates of the primacy of the Christian religion over other

¹⁴¹ Conradie, 117.

¹⁴² Conradie, 118.

religions, with the consequent elevation of Christian ecotheology over the general field of ‘ecology and religion,’ affirming the Christian confession of faith in the triune God as ultimate and interreligious earthkeeping as penultimate.¹⁴³

In this last dispute about the primacy of Christian ecotheology, Conradie reviews our cosmic orientation in the social reconstruction of reality along three frameworks. The first approach is agnosticism which allows for pluralism in viewing Christianity on a par with other religions, philosophies and *Weltanschauungen*. Another perspective is inclusivism which recognizes the difference inherent in each tradition but seeks common grounds of cooperation regardless of their different answers to fundamental questions about the ultimate reality. The third standpoint is exclusivism which upholds the primacy of a singular referent, affirming that “social constructions of the ultimate reality must be in the plural, but ultimate reality itself cannot but be in the singular.”¹⁴⁴

Finally, we are presented with the distinctiveness of Christian ecotheology as Conradie emphasizes that Christian ecotheology needs to give to the world what it alone can give amidst concerted efforts to “save the planet” from climate change and grave loss of biodiversity. This unique contribution is “the particular witness of the Christian faith as embodied in the *leitourgia*, *kerygma*, *diakonia*, *koinonia* and especially the *marturia* of Christian communities.”¹⁴⁵ His conclusion here is that “in response to such challenges Christians would need to delve deeper into the roots of their own traditions in order to retrieve the symbols and forms of wisdom” that may serve as compass for the terrain of Christian ecotheology.¹⁴⁶ This distinctive contribution of

¹⁴³ Conradie, 120–22.

¹⁴⁴ Conradie, 123.

¹⁴⁵ Conradie, 123.

¹⁴⁶ Conradie, 123.

Christian theology to resolving our current ecological crisis is the goal of this research. The chapters following will explore this invaluable Christian contribution from the Catholic perspective, from an African perspective and from an eschatological perspective as well.

2. Chapter Two: *Laudato Si'*: Green Theology in the *Magisterium* of the Church

Although the Catholic Church may not have previously developed an explicitly ‘green theology’, there is no gainsaying that elements of ‘green theology’ have not been altogether lacking in the teachings of the *Magisterium*. Kevin Irwin acclaims the Second Vatican Council through its 1965 *Gaudium et Spes* “as an entrée to the church’s published teaching on the environment.”¹⁴⁷ However, in recent times, the Catholic Church has become more explicitly green in her theological and pastoral formulations, as part of her social teaching. Indeed, Lucas Briola affirms Catholic social teaching stands out in its “comprehensive approach to the ecological crisis.” He cites the verdict of Celia Deane-Drummond that: “Ecology perceived as an aspect of other social injustices perhaps marks out the distinctive contribution of CST to ecotheology.”¹⁴⁸ Briola avers that “integral ecology” reflects this characteristically catholic approach to contemporary ecological discourse.¹⁴⁹ Ecology has since become a major concern in the Catholic theology of creation, evidenced in *Laudato Si'*, the most comprehensive treatment of the issue so far by the *Magisterium*.

a. Antecedents of *Laudato Si'*

In *Laudato Si'* we see several influences, and Francis himself acknowledges the overarching inspiration of St Francis of Assisi as well as the writings of three notable papal predecessors – John XXIII, John Paul II and Benedict XVI. We shall consider these antecedents, highlighting one classical contribution and one contemporary contribution. St Augustine, who is also African,

¹⁴⁷ Kevin W Irwin, *Commentary on Laudato Si': Examining the Background, Contributions, Implementation and Future of Pope Francis's Encyclical* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2016), 10.

¹⁴⁸ Lucas Briola, “Hearing and Answering the One Cry of Earth and Poor: An Integral Ecology, Eucharistic Healing, and the Scale of Values,” in *Everything Is Interconnected: Towards a Globalization with a Human Face and an Integral Ecology*, ed. Joseph Ogbonnaya and Lucas Briola, Marquette Studies in Theology; No. 90 (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2019), 120.

¹⁴⁹ Briola, 124.

represents the classical theology of creation. John Paul II deserves a place in contemporary Catholic ecological theology as he was the first Pope to make explicit the connection between ecology and Catholic theology.

i. The Trinitarian Foundation of Creation: Retrieving Augustine

The doctrine of the Trinity is fundamental to the Christian understanding of God, just as the doctrine of creation is to the Christian understanding of the world. For Augustine, however, there cannot be any true theology of creation without recourse to the Holy Trinity. Creation is the activity of the Holy Trinity, and the Three Persons of the Trinity all participate in the one action of creation. As Augustine teaches, creation is Trinitarian in origin, in structure and in sustenance. The basis for this claim which Augustine and the early Fathers discovered in their partitive exegesis is the inseparable operations of the Trinity. His works of interest affirming the origin of creation in the Trinity include: *The Trinity*, *On Genesis: a refutation of the Manichees*, *Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis* as well as *The Confessions*. Augustine intersects with our contemporary challenge of ecology, situating the crisis within humanity's (in)fidelity to our original vocation at creation. This biblical vocation has become blurred following man's distortion of God's primordial purpose. Hence, alignment with the order of the Trinity at creation is necessary to heal our world and pursue an effective ecotheology. Retrieving Augustine therefore is pivotal to presenting a Catholic theology of creation. As Jared Ortiz attests,

Augustine lives, speaks, and thinks in terms of creation.... For Augustine, creation is not just one doctrine or theme among others, but it is the foundational context for all doctrines and all themes.... Augustine's understanding of creation

is the Church's understanding.... It is so important because, as he understands it, the first article of the Creed contains the whole faith.¹⁵⁰

One of Augustine's theological landmarks however is the non-biblical doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* which he thoroughly developed.¹⁵¹ Furthermore, Augustine observes that "man was made on the same day as the beasts; for they are all alike earthly animals."¹⁵² In giving his blessing to man and beasts separately, "it may be significant that God uses the second person in blessing them so that he urges these animals as if they were somehow listening, when he says, 'Increase and multiply.'¹⁵³ Nonetheless, he identifies the difference between the two as the *imago Dei* which humankind possesses, not in reference to having eyes or limbs but rather in reference to "the interior man, where reason and intellect reside."¹⁵⁴ He continues that it is this image of God in humans that also confers dominion over the beasts on humans, and this dominion means different things for Augustine.

Man is said to have been made to the image of God, not on account of his body, but on account of that power by which he surpasses the cattle. For all the other animals are subject to man, not by reason of the body, but by reason of the intellect which we have and they do not have. Even our body has been made so that it reveals that we are better than the beasts and, for that reason, like God. For the bodies of all the animals which live either in the waters or on the earth, or which fly in the air, are turned toward the earth and are not erect as is the body of man. This signifies that our mind ought to be raised up toward those things above it, that is, to spiritual things. It is especially by reason of the mind that we

¹⁵⁰ Jared Ortiz, "Creation in the Confessions," in *The Confessions: With an Introduction and Contemporary Criticism*, ed. David Vincent Meconi, trans. Maria Boulding, Ignatius Critical Editions (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), 475–76.

¹⁵¹ Augustine, "Two Books on Genesis against the Manichees," in *On Genesis: Two Books on Genesis against the Manichees; and, On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis, an Unfinished Book*, trans. Roland J. Teske, The Fathers of the Church, v. 84 (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 47 (I.1.1).

¹⁵² Augustine, "On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis, an Unfinished Book," in *On Genesis: Two Books on Genesis against the Manichees; and, On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis, an Unfinished Book*, trans. Roland J. Teske, The Fathers of the Church, v. 84 (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 183 (16.55).

¹⁵³ Augustine, 180 (15.50).

¹⁵⁴ Augustine, "On Genesis against the Manichees," 76 (1.17.28).

understand that man was made to the image and likeness of God, as even the erect form of the body testifies.¹⁵⁵

This dominion is not to be understood in terms of triumphalism but a grave sense of volition and responsibility which God thrusts on human beings. He translates dominion as immunity from being tamed by the animals: “He can be tamed by none, although he tames very many and nearly all of them.”¹⁵⁶ Also, this dominion is translated to be responsibility of cosmic understanding and right judgment as seen in the naming of the animals.¹⁵⁷ More so, dominion is also internal upon human beings themselves, to subdue oneself for the human being is made up of two parts: “the rational part in him that rules is distinct from the animal part which is ruled.”¹⁵⁸ Dominion then is translated as temperance and modesty over our nature, over our tendencies, over the beast in us.¹⁵⁹ Above all, Augustine views man’s privileged position in creation as a vocation of service for “man was placed in paradise so as to work and guard it,”¹⁶⁰ as our original vocation in creation.

Augustine emphasizes the goodness of creation. Individually and severally, everything that God made is good as Genesis 1:4 holds indicating God’s approval of his own work,¹⁶¹ but taken in its entirety, scripture (Gen 1:31) itself seems overwhelmed that it is “very good”. This superlative goodness is considered as the totality of the universe, beyond individual good things.¹⁶² Augustine carries this doctrine of the intrinsic goodness of all creation to its logical conclusion in

¹⁵⁵ Augustine, 76 (1.17.28).

¹⁵⁶ Augustine, 77 (1.18.29).

¹⁵⁷ Augustine, 112 (2.11.16); Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. Maria Boulding, 1st ed, Vintage Spiritual Classics (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 327 (XIII.23.33); Augustine, 329 (XIII.23.34).

¹⁵⁸ Augustine, “On Genesis against the Manichees,” 112 (2.11.16).

¹⁵⁹ Augustine, 78–79 (1.20.31).

¹⁶⁰ Augustine, 111 (2.11.15).

¹⁶¹ Augustine, “On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis, an Unfinished Book,” 158 (5.22); Augustine, “On Genesis against the Manichees,” 61 (1.8.13).

¹⁶² Augustine, *The Confessions*, 336 (XIII.28.43); Augustine, “On Genesis against the Manichees,” 80 (1.21.32).

affirming the relevance of otherwise fruitless and harmful plants¹⁶³ as well as harmful animals. In a way, they serve to keep us humble,¹⁶⁴ as though God were speaking to us in Job 38:11: “Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed.”¹⁶⁵ Their usefulness is not for man to define as these creatures serve the purpose of their maker. They are beautiful to God. They complete the integrity and diversity of the universe. The integrity of the universe is greater than our house, and it is God who governs the universe.¹⁶⁶ He sums it up demarcating good from evil as our fidelity or infidelity to God’s will brings upon us, courtesy of our free will in keeping to man’s original vocation at creation.¹⁶⁷

Augustine makes it clear that there cannot be creation outside the Trinity. As a rule of faith, the Trinity established the whole of creation. In his words,

Here is that faith: God the Father Almighty made and established all of creation through his only-begotten Son, that is, through the Wisdom and Power consubstantial and coeternal to himself, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, who is also consubstantial and coeternal. Therefore, the Catholic discipline commands that we believe that this Trinity is called one God and that he has made and created all the things that there are insofar as they are.... Made by God, not out of the nature of God, but out of nothing. Thus nothing of the Trinity is found in all of creation apart from the fact that the Trinity created it and it was created.¹⁶⁸

Creation is the activity of the Holy Trinity, and the Three Persons of the Trinity all participate in the one action of creation. This one act of creation encompasses the Trinitarian establishment, conversion and governance of creation. “Through a combination of philosophical reflection and Christian exegesis, Augustine discerns that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit create in a threefold simultaneous act, which he describes under the terms ‘creation’, ‘conversion’ and ‘formation’

¹⁶³ Augustine, “On Genesis against the Manichees,” 67 (1.13.19).

¹⁶⁴ Augustine, 73 (1.16.26).

¹⁶⁵ Walter J Harrelson, *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Nashville, Tenn: Abingdon Press, 2003). Subsequent quotations from this edition will be cited in the text by me.

¹⁶⁶ Augustine, “On Genesis against the Manichees,” 72–74 (1.16.25–1.16.26).

¹⁶⁷ Augustine, “On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis, an Unfinished Book,” 146 (1.3).

¹⁶⁸ Augustine, 145–46 (1.2).

(*creatio, conversio, formatio*).”¹⁶⁹ So creation is both Trinitarian in origin and Trinitarian in act as well. Augustine gives evidence of the latter in his reflection on the structure of creation having the triad of unity, form and order.¹⁷⁰ Again, he exposes the tripartite nature of creation in terms of having measure, number and weight.¹⁷¹ Indeed, nature proclaims its founder, the Trinity,¹⁷² just as much as our mental acts which Augustine explores in his psychological analogies of the Trinity also do. In the *Confessions*, he recognizes the triad in man as being, knowledge and will, inseparable yet distinct.¹⁷³ Man was made *imago trinitatis*.¹⁷⁴ Augustine actually defines the Trinity in the making of man:

We understand ‘Let us make man to our image and likeness’ as spoken not in the singular, but in the plural. For man was not made to the image of the Father alone, or of the Son alone, or of the Holy Spirit alone, but to the image of the Trinity. This Trinity is a Trinity in such a way that it is one God, and it is one God in such a way that it is a Trinity.¹⁷⁵

The Trinitarian founding of creation does not amount to a plurality in the source of all that is, as Augustine clarifies: “With reference to creation Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one origin, just as they are one creator and one lord.”¹⁷⁶ As a matter of fact, “this is why after the plural expression, *Let us make man*, the singular is implied by the next verse, *So God made man in his own image*, and after the *according to our image and likeness* the singular is suggested by *in the image of he created him*.”¹⁷⁷ Therefore, we may view the Trinitarian establishment, conversion and governance of creation from the doctrine of inseparable operation of the Trinity which

¹⁶⁹ Ortiz, “Creation in the Confessions,” 478.

¹⁷⁰ Augustine, *The Trinity*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill, The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century; Pt. 1, v. 5 (Brooklyn, N.Y.: New City Press, 1991), 213 (VI.2.12).

¹⁷¹ Augustine, 318 (XI.4.18).

¹⁷² Augustine, 399 (XV.2.6); 402 (XV.2.10); 426 (XV.5.39).

¹⁷³ Augustine, *The Confessions*, 311 (XIII.11.12).

¹⁷⁴ Augustine, *The Trinity*, 390 (XIV.5.25).

¹⁷⁵ Augustine, “On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis, an Unfinished Book,” 187 (16.61).

¹⁷⁶ Augustine, 199 (V.3.15); 198 (V.3.14).

¹⁷⁷ Augustine, *The Confessions*, 327 (XIII.22.32).

Augustine defends vigorously as the principle operating not only at creation but also at the incarnation, baptism, resurrection, throughout salvation history.¹⁷⁸

Augustine exultantly discovers the entire Trinity in the creation account of Genesis, albeit in symbolic form: “The name ‘God’ signified the Father who made these things, and the name ‘Beginning’ the Son in whom he made them.... And there was your Spirit poised above the waters! Here, then, is the Trinity who is my God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, creator of the whole created universe.”¹⁷⁹ He has a lot to say about the Holy Spirit hovering over the waters,¹⁸⁰ and further insists that it is the entire Trinity on the waters,¹⁸¹ not the Holy Spirit alone. He interprets “Beginning” as “principle”, “Wisdom”, “Son of God”, “Word of God”, “Christ”¹⁸² and brings the Son’s mission into focus, thereby running a single string through the entire economy of salvation – creation, incarnation, redemption, explaining how “good and fitting” it is for the Son to become the mediator between God and men.¹⁸³ So Augustine situates creation within the context of our salvation history.¹⁸⁴ What this entails is that we have our example to walk by from the Word of God at creation, that Word which sustains the universe. But how have we sustained the universe ourselves in our present time as the Word of God enjoins us?

Especially notable to the modern ear, Augustine leans towards male superiority which was wont in his era and his language is not gender-inclusive. The male rules while the female obeys.¹⁸⁵

¹⁷⁸ Augustine, *The Trinity*, 174 (IV.5.29); 275 (IX.1.8); 428 (XV.6.44).

¹⁷⁹ Augustine, *The Confessions*, 308 (XIII.5.6).

¹⁸⁰ Augustine, “On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis, an Unfinished Book,” 155 (4.16); Augustine, “On Genesis against the Manichees,” 56 (1.5.8).

¹⁸¹ Augustine, *The Confessions*, 310 (XIII.9.10).

¹⁸² Augustine, “On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis, an Unfinished Book,” 148 (3.6); Augustine, “On Genesis against the Manichees,” 50 (1.2.3).

¹⁸³ Augustine, *The Trinity*, 353 (13.4.13).

¹⁸⁴ Augustine, 411 (XV.3.20).

¹⁸⁵ Augustine, “On Genesis against the Manichees,” 111 2.11.15.

Only the male is the *imago Dei*, only the male reflects the glory of God.¹⁸⁶ Nonetheless, he holds that the male dominion over the female is only physical and sexual but both are equal by nature in rational mind and intelligence.¹⁸⁷ Concluding this section therefore, it is my conviction that Augustine's Trinitarian theology of creation though in patristic categories can be appropriated to help reorient humanity presently as we grapple with the ecological crises increasingly ravaging us. Inclusiveness is the watchword here. Augustine teaches that we are modeled after the Trinity, and the entire ecosystem is a window through which we further discover the Triune God. Humanity is the *imago Trinitatis* with the consequent vocation of participating in the sustenance of creation, rather than creating imbalance in God's cosmos. The more we keep true to God's will for us at creation, the less evil we contend with, and evil as Augustine presents it is whatever defaces any aspect of the goodness of the Trinitarian creation. Theology today cannot but embrace ecology, and Augustine is a good resource for a contemporary eco-theology, as he emphasizes a community of creation singing praise to the Trinity.

i. Pope John Paul II: First Green Pope?

Ever since the terse five-page article published by Lynn White Jr., in the 1967 edition of the *Science* Journal, there has been increased, if not freshly infused, consciousness in the world of Christian theology about contemporary ecology. Titled *The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis*, he reasons that the Judeo-Christian tradition is the bane of ecology in asserting man's dominion over nature, including naming the animals, and making a distinction between man (formed in God's image) and the rest of creation. White's verdict is heavy: "Christianity bears a

¹⁸⁶ Augustine, "On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis, an Unfinished Book," 187 (16.61); Augustine, *The Trinity*, 327 (XII.2.9-XII.3.10).

¹⁸⁷ Augustine, *The Confessions*, 339 (XIII.32.47).

huge burden of guilt”¹⁸⁸ in our ecological crises. At the climax of his diatribe, he asks: “What shall we do? No one yet knows. Unless we think about fundamentals, our specific measures may produce new backlashes more serious than those they are designed to remedy.”¹⁸⁹ He remarks that

We shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man.... Both our present science and our present technology are so tintured with orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature that no solution for our ecologic crisis can be expected from them alone. Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not. We must rethink and refeel our nature and destiny.¹⁹⁰

Nonetheless, Lynn White singles out St Francis of Assisi as going against this anthropocentric trend. He rules that “Saint Francis proposed what he thought was an alternative Christian view of nature and man’s relation to it: he tried to substitute the idea of the equality of all creatures, including man, for the idea of man’s limitless rule of creation. He failed.”¹⁹¹ From this he throws his parting shot: “I propose Francis as a patron saint for ecologists.”¹⁹²

A lot of reactions have trailed Lynn White’s ecological battle cry. Quite remarkably, Pope John Paul II would make this recommendation by Lynn White one of his first pontifical acts. In 1979, Pope John Paul II who had only ascended the Papacy the previous year issued a Papal Bull declaring St Francis of Assisi the patron of ecology. In the Papal Bull promulgating this, the Holy Father was emphatic that: “Among the holy and admirable men who have revered nature as a wonderful gift of God to the human race, St Francis of Assisi deserves special

¹⁸⁸ White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” 1206.

¹⁸⁹ White, 1204.

¹⁹⁰ White, 1207.

¹⁹¹ White, 1207.

¹⁹² White, 1207.

consideration.”¹⁹³ It was just about a decade since White made his clinical recommendation for an alternative Christian cosmological orientation and the ecological recognition of St Francis of Assisi. White’s prophecy had indeed come to pass.

Responsibility for creation as a show of respect for God is a core component of the Catholic Social teachings (CST).¹⁹⁴ This principle saw its first dedicated formulation in Pope John Paul’s 1990 *Peace* message. Theologians defer to this document as the watershed moment in the Church’s teachings on creation as it is the first Vatican statement that is devoted exclusively to the ecological question.¹⁹⁵ Nature embodies the sacramentality of God’s creative presence on earth. In light of this, Pope John Paul II reflects on the disorder in “the relationship between human activity and the whole of creation,”¹⁹⁶ highlighting the current ecological crises as a moral problem. In search of a solution, he recognizes the ecological vocation as a common responsibility and stresses the urgent need for a new solidarity as well as “a courageous reform of structures.”¹⁹⁷

In his 1990 World Day of Peace message titled *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation*, John Paul II innovatively addresses the ecological crises as a growing threat to world peace and a moral emergency, engineered “by a lack of respect for nature, by the plundering of

¹⁹³ John Paul II, “Papal Declaration of Francis as Patron of Ecology,” 1979, <https://francis35.org/english/papal-declaration-francis-patron-ecology/>.

¹⁹⁴ Jame Schaefer, “Solidarity, Subsidiarity, & Preference for the Poor: Extending Catholic Social Teaching in Response to the Climate Crisis,” in *Confronting the Climate Crisis: Catholic Theological Perspectives*, ed. Jame Schaefer, Marquette Studies in Theology; #75 (Milwaukee, Wis.: Marquette University Press, 2011), 390.

¹⁹⁵ Connie Lasher and Charles Murphy, “‘With Generous Courage’ Promise & Poignance in the Legacies of Pope John Paul II & Pope Benedict XVI,” in *Confronting the Climate Crisis: Catholic Theological Perspectives*, ed. Jame Schaefer, Marquette Studies in Theology; #75 (Milwaukee, Wis.: Marquette University Press, 2011), 372; Schaefer, “Solidarity, Subsidiarity, & Preference for the Poor: Extending Catholic Social Teaching in Response to the Climate Crisis,” 390.

¹⁹⁶ John Paul II, *The Ecological Crisis*, §5.

¹⁹⁷ John Paul II, §11.

natural resources and by a progressive decline in the quality of life.”¹⁹⁸ He reminds us of the reason behind the Church’s theology of creation, which is the intrinsic goodness of creation, repeatedly confirmed by the biblical account of creation. He stresses that: “God saw everything that he had made, and behold, *it was very good* (Gen 1:31). God entrusted the whole of creation to the man and woman, and only then – as we read – could he rest ‘from all his work’ (Gen 2:3).”¹⁹⁹ For him, dominion should be exercised in wisdom and love, in harmony with God’s plan, which Adam and Eve went against by choosing sin. The spiraling consequences of this were the alienation of humankind from God, humanity’s alienation from itself, death, the rebellion of creation against humanity and the continuous destruction of the environment. His solution is simple: *metanoia*.²⁰⁰

Respect for creation and respect for life must go together; to be pro-environment is to be pro-life. Advances in science and technology, industrial production, labor laws, exploration of natural resources and biomedical experimentation cannot neglect the integrity of creation and the dignity of the human person. Individuals, states and international bodies must take concrete steps to halt the pollution, depletion of the ozone layer, “greenhouse effect” and the destruction of plant and animal life rife in today’s world. There is an urgent need for a new solidarity across the board for this to happen. Modern society cannot achieve ecological balance “without directly addressing the structural forms of poverty that exist throughout the world.”²⁰¹ Humanity cannot overlook the need for education in ecological responsibility and the aesthetic value of creation as well. This

¹⁹⁸ John Paul II, §1.

¹⁹⁹ John Paul II, §13.

²⁰⁰ John Paul II, §13.

²⁰¹ John Paul II, §11.

responsibility is a moral one and a responsibility for everyone because “the ecological crisis is a moral issue.”²⁰² As he puts it, this call is beyond the confines of religious affiliation:

Even men and women without any particular religious conviction, but with an acute sense of their responsibilities for the common good, recognize their obligation to contribute to the restoration of a healthy environment. All the more should men and women who believe in God the Creator, and who are thus convinced that there is a well-defined unity and order in the world, feel called to address the problem. Christians, in particular, realize that their responsibility within creation and their duty towards nature are an essential part of their faith. As a result, they are conscious of a vast field of ecumenical and interreligious cooperation opening up before them.²⁰³

He concludes by exhorting Christians after the example of St Francis of Assisi’s ecological fraternity as well as human fraternity. According to him, this is the inspiration that we need in order to effectively fulfill our divine obligation of caring for all of God’s creation.

b. Pope Francis: The Assisi Paradigm

Interestingly, almost fifty years after White made his outlandish call, Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio became Pope in March 2013. He took Francis as his papal name in honor of St Francis of Assisi. Although Francis published the encyclical *Lumen Fidei* in 2013, which his predecessor had begun, he would publish his first initiated encyclical in 2015, with the title *Laudato si’* on care for our common home, a title taken from St Francis of Assisi’s *Canticle of the Sun* (also known as the *Canticle of the Creatures*). With the ecological thrust of the encyclical, the document could as well have been drafted by Lynn White. Nonetheless, Pope Francis addresses White’s concerns by retreating to Augustine’s Trinitarian theology of creation. Francis here teaches that “the divine Persons are subsistent relations, and the world, created according to the

²⁰² John Paul II, §15.

²⁰³ John Paul II, §15.

divine model, is a web of relationships.”²⁰⁴ What I find most profound in the encyclical, however, is the inward ecological conversion that Francis advocates for, giving ecology a human face in spite of all.

Laudato Si' is the longest papal encyclical.²⁰⁵ It is divided into six chapters, each chapter treating a different theme, all climaxing towards integrating both the environmental and social dimensions in an authentic integral ecology. True to its title, the encyclical explores what is happening to our common home, earth, decrying the widespread pollution, climate change, lack of potable water, loss of biodiversity, the decline in the quality of human life coupled with breakdown of society, global inequality, weak ecological and humanitarian responses, as well as a variety of closed, extreme, unilateral opinions. How do all these relate? Francis gives an answer:

The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation. In fact, the deterioration of the environment and of society affects the most vulnerable people on the planet.²⁰⁶

He exhibits deep regard for what I call *eco-anthropology* wherein man exists in a protected ecological system, and in preserving the ecological system, realizes his own preservation, but in degrading the ecosystem which he is integrally part of, he also degrades himself. This truth the Pope affirms in his gospel of creation.

²⁰⁴ Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §240.

²⁰⁵ Joshtrom Isaac Kureethadam, *The Ten Green Commandments of Laudato Si'* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2019), xvi.

²⁰⁶ Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §48.

i. The Gospel of Creation

The gospel of creation in the encyclical vividly portrays the light offered by faith and the wisdom of the biblical accounts which immerse us in the mystery of the universe. The universe itself has a unique place and message for each creature in the harmony of creation, building up a rich and diverse universal communion with a common destination of the earth's goods. This Gospel of creation turns us towards the gaze of Jesus, the *Logos* through whom all things were made. According to his creation theology which radiates the goodness of creation and the dignity cum responsibility of humankind created in *imago Dei*,

Human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself. According to the Bible, these three vital relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us. This rupture is sin. The harmony between the Creator, humanity and creation as a whole was disrupted by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations. This in turn distorted our mandate to “have dominion” over the earth (cf. Gen 1:28), to “till it and keep it” (Gen 2:15). As a result, the originally harmonious relationship between human beings and nature became conflictual (cf. Gen 3:17-19).²⁰⁷

Pope Francis is emphatic that “the Bible has no place for a tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned for other creatures.”²⁰⁸ Consequently, he reinterprets the above problematic concepts of dominion, tilling and keeping:

This allows us to respond to the charge that Judeo-Christian thinking, on the basis of the Genesis account which grants man “dominion” over the earth (cf. Gen 1:28), has encouraged the unbridled exploitation of nature by painting him as domineering and destructive by nature. This is not a correct interpretation of the Bible as understood by the Church. Although it is true that we Christians have at times incorrectly interpreted the Scriptures, nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God's image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures. The biblical texts are to be read in their context, with an appropriate hermeneutic, recognizing that they

²⁰⁷ Francis, §66.

²⁰⁸ Francis, §68.

tell us to “till and keep” the garden of the world (cf. Gen 2:15). “Tilling” refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while “keeping” means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving. This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature.²⁰⁹

This responsibility for nature and for fellow human beings imposes on us the duty to listen to both the cry of the earth, trodden underneath us; as well as the cry of the poor, the downtrodden.

ii. The Cry of the Earth

Laudato Si' is strongly-worded, and at the very beginning, Pope Francis reverberates the Earth cry, chastising mankind for forgetting that “we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. Gen 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters,” lamenting:

Our Sister, Mother Earth... now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she “groans in travail” (Rom 8:22).²¹⁰

He traces the human roots of the ecological crises and the drastic effects on the environment, including pollution, climate change and loss of biodiversity.

1. Pollution

Pope Francis raises the alarm that pollution has become “part of people’s daily experience.”²¹¹

These pollutants pose grave health hazards to everyone, especially the poor, leading also to the acidification of air, soil and water, and widespread environmental degradation. The sources of

²⁰⁹ Francis, §67.

²¹⁰ Francis, §§1-2.

²¹¹ Francis, §20.

these are carbon fumes from fuel combustion, industrial wastes, agrotoxins as well as radioactive and non-biodegradable by-products. Technology has proven incapable of solving this monstrous problem, unfortunately.²¹² Thus Francis laments that “the earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth,” because “our industrial system, at the end of its cycle of production and consumption, has not developed the capacity to absorb and reuse waste and by-products.”²¹³ He further links these problems of pollution and waste to a “throwaway culture” which affects those on the fringes of society and also quickly makes waste out of things rather than a circular model of recycling to salvage our climate.

2. Climate Change

The *2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference*, also known as COP 21 (the twenty-first session of the Conference of the Parties [COP]) or CMP 11 (the eleventh session of the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol [CMP]), took place in Paris from 30 November to 11 December 2015.²¹⁴ The *Laudato Si'* encyclical letter was written ahead of this COP 2015.²¹⁵ In the encyclical, Francis regards the climate as a common good which is increasingly under attack, resulting in climate warming, rise in sea level and weather extremes. Ahead of the global deliberations, therefore, the Pope pushes for humanity to realize the need for pragmatic changes in lifestyle, policy, production and consumption. He recognizes that there are non-human factors such as deviations in the earth's orbit and axis, volcanic activity and the solar cycle, which also have a hand in climate change.

²¹² Francis, §20.

²¹³ Francis, §22.

²¹⁴ United Nations Climate Change, “COP 21 | UNFCCC,” accessed March 22, 2021, <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/conferences/past-conferences/paris-climate-change-conference-november-2015/cop-21>.

²¹⁵ Chris Manus and Des Obioma, “Preaching the ‘Green Gospel’ in Our Environment: A Re-Reading of Genesis 1:27-28 in the Nigerian Context,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72, no. 4 (May 31, 2016): 1, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i4.3054>.

However, human activity is mainly responsible for most global warming due to the high concentration of greenhouse gases such as methane, nitrogen oxides, chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and carbon dioxide. He reiterates the scientific discovery that “concentrated in the atmosphere, these gases do not allow the warmth of the sun’s rays reflected by the earth to be dispersed in space.”²¹⁶ Climate warming viciously affects the carbon cycle with dire consequences not limited to the gradual extinction of parts of our planet’s biodiversity. It deprives the poor of access to livelihood from fishing, forestry and agriculture. It is a global problem with far-reaching implications – environmental, economic, distribution of goods and earth’s resources, social and also political. Climate change is worth our attention because “it represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity on our day.”²¹⁷ Furthermore, it has resulted in increased numbers of migrants trying to flee from areas with growing poverty occasioned by environmental plunder, many of whom lack legal status or protection. Indeed, climate change is both an environmental and a humanitarian emergency.

3. Loss of Biodiversity

Charles Darwin’s version of the loss of biodiversity leaves the cause to chance, positing that “Natural Selection almost inevitably causes much Extinction of the less improved forms of life.”²¹⁸ Francis also decries the rising loss of planetary biodiversity and extinction of endangered species, all of which contribute to the harmony of creation and are vital to the good functioning of the ecosystem, but alleges human activity as the culprit behind this ecocide.

The earth’s resources are also being plundered because of shortsighted approaches to the economy, commerce and production. The loss of forests and woodlands entails the loss of species which may constitute extremely important resources in

²¹⁶ Francis, *Laudato Si’*, 23.

²¹⁷ Francis, *Laudato Si’*, §25.

²¹⁸ Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, 97.

the future, not only for food but also for food but also for curing disease and other uses. Different species contain genes which could be key resources in years ahead for meeting human needs and regulating environmental problems.²¹⁹

Francis notes that some of these ecological fallouts are human interventions initiated to address an existing problem only to begin a vicious circle of environmental destruction aggravating the erstwhile situation. Caring for the ecosystem must be farsighted, comprehensive and therapeutic. Again, certain species should be accorded special protection to save them from extinction. Loss of the array of diversity due to deforestation for example is not usually adequately restituted for by planting of trees, which are more often than not monocultures. The remedy he proposes is responsible intervention and greater investment in research to better understand how all creatures are interconnected and interdependent on one another.

iii. The Cry of the Poor

Pope Francis extols St Francis whose name he took as his “guide and inspiration” when he was elected Pope, acclaiming him as “a mystic and a pilgrim who lived in simplicity and in wonderful harmony with God, with others, with nature and with himself. He shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace.”²²⁰ In tuning our ears to the cry of the poor, he talks about the decline on the quality of human life, global inequality and the common destination of goods. “Human beings too are creatures of this world, enjoying a right to life and happiness, and endowed with unique dignity. So we cannot fail to consider the effects on people’s lives of environmental deterioration, current models of development and the throwaway culture.”²²¹ The same structures responsible for wanton environmental destruction are also responsible for ravishing human

²¹⁹ Francis, *Laudato Si’*, §32.

²²⁰ Francis, §10.

²²¹ Francis, §43.

habitation and livelihood, ridiculing of the dignity of certain classes of people, and enlarging the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

1. Quality of Human Life

Paradoxically, the tremendous advancements of the past two centuries have not really translated into a better quality of life and integral development. Rather, social decline and breakdown of society have been on the rise. As Francis puts it,

The social dimensions of global change include the effects of technological innovations on employment, social exclusion, an inequitable distribution and consumption of energy and other services, social breakdown, increased violence and a rise in new forms of social aggression, drug trafficking, growing drug use by young people, and the loss of identity.²²²

The average life expectancy in Nigeria as of 2019, courtesy of the World Population Review was 54.494 years, meaning that an average Nigerian is not expected to live beyond their 55th birthday. That actually breaks down into 55.414 years for women but 53.6 years for men.²²³ For this current year 2021, the United Nations projects the average life expectancy for Nigeria as 55.12 years and for the United States, it is 78.99 years for same 2021.²²⁴

Bloomberg reports the escalating unemployment rate in Nigeria as 33 percent for 2020.²²⁵ For 2021, the unemployment rate in Nigeria is estimated to be 32.5 percent but projected back to 33 percent by 2022, according to data from the National Bureau of Statistics (Nigeria) published

²²² Francis, §46.

²²³ Chukwuma Muanya, "Nigerians Have Fifth Worst Average Life Expectancy of 55 Years, Says Report," *The Guardian Nigeria News - Nigeria and World News*, November 12, 2019, <https://guardian.ng/news/nigerians-have-fifth-worst-average-life-expectancy-of-55-years-says-report/>.

²²⁴ Macrotrends, "Nigeria Life Expectancy 1950-2021," 2021, <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/NGA/nigeria/life-expectancy>.

²²⁵ Bloomberg, "Nigeria Unemployment Rate Rises to 33%, Second Highest on Global List," *Bloomberg.Com*, March 15, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-03-15/nigeria-unemployment-rate-rises-to-second-highest-on-global-list>.

this March 2021.²²⁶ In the US, 2020 unemployment rates released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (USA) showed February 2020 as 3.5 percent, April 2020 as 14.7 percent and November 2020 as 6.7 percent.²²⁷ Those statistics are reported as 6.2 percent for February 2021.²²⁸

The city of San Francisco in California here in the US has a minimum wage of \$16.07. Of course, other cities differ, as do other states.²²⁹ However, it is a far different cry from what is obtainable in Nigeria. The Federal Government of Nigeria has a proposed minimum wage scheme which some states in Nigeria are yet to adopt, claiming they cannot pay these workers such an amount. According to recent research by Simona Varrella, a renowned statistician,

The national minimum wage for federal workers in Nigeria reached 30 thousand Nigerian Naira in 2020, which equaled to about 77 U.S. dollars. On average, the monthly cost of living for an individual in Nigeria amounted to 43.2 thousand Naira, whereas this figure added up to 137.6 thousand Naira for a family. In 2019, the minimum wage of 30 thousand Naira became law.²³⁰

As Pope Francis observes, dignified living has become exclusive to limited groups of people with little care for those struggling to survive. Even certain neighborhoods are reserved for a privileged few while “the disposable of society”²³¹ are pushed systematically toward inhabiting areas with less infrastructural and government support. Francis decries this growing environmental racism. For Hannah Murphy, “to be for the environment is to be for racial justice

²²⁶ Simona Varrella, “Nigeria: Forecasted Unemployment Rate 2021-2022,” Statista, March 19, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1119227/forecasted-unemployment-rate-in-nigeria/>.

²²⁷ “National Employment Monthly Update,” August 7, 2020, <https://www.ncsl.org/research/labor-and-employment/national-employment-monthly-update.aspx>.

²²⁸ Statista Research Department, “U.S. Unemployment Rate: Adjusted, February 2021,” Statista, March 11, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/273909/seasonally-adjusted-monthly-unemployment-rate-in-the-us/>.

²²⁹ Crystal Miller-O’Brien and Aaron N. Colby, “California’s 2021 Minimum Wage Increase to Impact Exempt and Nonexempt Employees | Davis Wright Tremaine,” December 16, 2020, <https://www.dwt.com/blogs/employment-labor-and-benefits/2020/12/2021-california-state-local-minimum-wage>.

²³⁰ Simona Varrella, “Nigeria: Minimum Wage 2018-2020,” Statista, September 4, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1119133/monthly-minimum-wage-in-nigeria/>.

²³¹ Francis, *Laudato Si’*, 45.

and equality.”²³² With Pope Francis therefore she affirms an integral ecology that pursues both environmental justice and justice for the least of our human class system. A chain is as strong as its weakest link; so also is humanity as rich as its poorest fellow. Homelessness, fewer educational, recreational and health facilities, waste dump, poor transportation and increased crime rate are disturbing problems that are characteristic of these areas which are a visible testament of the inequalities we live with, a vexatious problem for Francis.

2. Global Inequality

The Holy Father is saddened by the elevation of this exploitation of the earth’s resources even to the larger planes of human existence, further bridging the gap between the so-called first world and third world countries, calling out multinationals for unethical human and environmental practices in the developing countries which they prey on, and which they would never do in the developed countries. The Pontiff calls for urgent intervention to ease the foreign debts of developing nations, which has been turned into a weapon of control by developed nations. He regrets that:

Inequity affects not only individuals but entire countries; it compels us to consider an ethics of international relations. A true “ecological debt” exists, particularly between the global north and south, connected to commercial imbalances with effects on the environment, and the disproportionate use of natural resources by certain countries over long periods of time. The export of raw materials to satisfy markets in the industrialized north has caused harm locally.²³³

The slave trade stands as one of the darkest moments of human history. The slave trade thrived based on the perceived inequalities in the human species, akin to George Orwell’s observation that “some animals are more equal than others.”²³⁴ Tribalism, racism and neocolonialism are

²³² Murphy, “On the Intersections of Environmental Racism & the Black Lives Matter Movement,” 6.

²³³ Francis, *Laudato Si’*, §51.

²³⁴ George Orwell, *Animal Farm*, Everyman’s Library (New York: Knopf, 1993).

current trends that have remained after the abolition of slavery, and these are more ingrained now than ever. Cries against systemic racism rose to a crescendo in 2020 with the global Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests triggered by the murder of an unarmed black man George Floyd by a white police officer, Derek Chauvin, kneeling on his neck while he was pinned to the floor by police officers.²³⁵ The incident occurred on May 25, 2020, in Minneapolis, Minnesota USA. It was one death too many, highlighting unabated police brutality and systemic profiling of blacks. Such notions of the superiority of a group assume some other groups are not so fit to live or share meaningfully in the earth's goods.

3. Common Destination of Goods

Pope Francis presents a universal claim that “the earth is essentially a shared inheritance, whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone.”²³⁶ With the rich getting much richer and the poor getting much poorer, world economics today is ruled by the principle of survival of the fittest. Political permutations and business manipulations also contrive to keep some away from the national cake or global fast lane. The Pope protests against this:

Hence every ecological approach needs to incorporate a social perspective which takes into account the fundamental rights of the poor and the underprivileged. The principle of the subordination of private property to the universal destination of goods, and thus the right of everyone to their use, is a golden rule of social conduct and “the first principle of the whole ethical and social order”.²³⁷

Consequently the Pope speaks against reckless consumerism as it has created a worrisome imbalance in the distribution of the earth's resources.

²³⁵ BBC News, “George Floyd: What Happened in the Final Moments of His Life,” *BBC News*, July 16, 2020, sec. US & Canada, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52861726>.

²³⁶ Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 93.

²³⁷ Francis, 93.

iv. Modern Anthropocentrism

Consequently, Francis addresses what he terms “the human roots of the ecological crisis.”²³⁸ These range from technology (creativity and power) to the globalization of the technological paradigm, as well as the crisis and effects of modern anthropocentrism which he addresses under broader areas like practical relativism, the need to protect employment and new biological technologies. His Holiness advocates for an integral ecology marked by environmental, economic and social ecology, cultural ecology, ecology of daily life, the principle of the common good and justice between nations. Furthermore, he boldly throws up lines of approach and action wherein he reiterates his call for non-partisan, non-profit dialogue, cooperation and subsidiarity. This dialogue is proposed on five levels to undo “the spiral of self-destruction which currently engulfs us”²³⁹ These five levels are presented as: dialogue on the environment in the international community; dialogue for new national and local policies; dialogue and transparency in decision-making; politics and economy in dialogue for human fulfillment and finally, religions in dialogue with science.²⁴⁰ Certainly, it is neither a one-stop engagement nor a closed-perspective ritual. It has to be open, constructive and enduring.

c. *Fratelli Tutti*

Fratelli Tutti is the social encyclical published by Pope Francis in 2020 in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is his third encyclical letter. It not only follows *Laudato Si'* chronologically but also in orientation. *Laudato Si'* inclines us to hearken to the cry of the earth and the cry of humanity. *Fratelli Tutti* dwells on this latter part, seeking to repair our damaged human ecology. The title *Fratelli Tutti* is Italian for *All Brothers*, a phrase also taken from the

²³⁸ Francis, *Laudato Si'*.

²³⁹ Francis, §163.

²⁴⁰ Francis.

Admonitions of St Francis of Assisi, as “with these words, Saint Francis of Assisi addressed his brothers and sisters and proposed to them a way of life marked by the flavour of the Gospel.”²⁴¹ This encyclical on fraternity and social friendship is a deep reflection on the parable of the Good Samaritan which forms its theological core. According to the Vatican, the main question which this timely encyclical undertakes to answer is: “What are the great ideals but also the tangible ways to advance for those who wish to build a more just and fraternal world in their ordinary relationships, in social life, politics and institutions?”²⁴² This paper discusses three interrelated themes in *Fratelli Tutti*’s humanistic ecology, namely: building walls, interconnectedness and belongingness. The keyword for Francis in all of these is *community*.

i. Walls: Bridging the Divide

The encyclical denounces the use of new euphemisms which divide rather than unite humanity. Often these euphemisms have become slogans used by the favored to couch the continuous oppression of the remnants. Highlighting expressions such as “opening up to the world,”²⁴³ which is a neo-colonization euphemism for unilateral transnational economic interests, the Pontiff queries: “Nowadays, what do certain words like democracy, freedom, justice or unity really mean? They have been bent and shaped to serve as tools for domination, as meaningless tags that can be used to justify any action.”²⁴⁴ He condemns globalism that is built on the principle of “divide and conquer,”²⁴⁵ advancing the interests of the powerful persons,

²⁴¹ Francis, *Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship: Encyclical Letter*, 2020, §1, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

²⁴² Isabella Piro, “‘Fratelli Tutti’: Short Summary of Pope Francis’s Social Encyclical - Vatican News,” October 4, 2020, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-10/fratelli-tutti-pope-fraternity-social-friendship-short-summary.html>.

²⁴³ Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §12.

²⁴⁴ Francis, §§12, 14.

²⁴⁵ Francis, §12.

corporations and nations, to the detriment of the human, natural and cultural resources of the host localities.

In the same vein, Francis decries the rising fear of the other, leading to a culture of exclusion rather than inclusion. We erect walls to feed our fear with a false sense of protection from other human beings.

Paradoxically, we have certain ancestral fears that technological development has not succeeded in eliminating; indeed, those fears have been able to hide and spread behind new technologies. Today too, outside the ancient town walls lies the abyss, the territory of the unknown, the wilderness. Whatever comes from there cannot be trusted, for it is unknown, unfamiliar, not part of the village. It is the territory of the “barbarian”, from whom we must defend ourselves at all costs. As a result, new walls are erected for self-preservation, the outside world ceases to exist and leaves only “my” world, to the point that others, no longer considered human beings possessed of an inalienable dignity, become only “them”. Once more, we encounter “the temptation to build a culture of walls, to raise walls, walls in the heart, walls on the land, in order to prevent this encounter with other cultures, with other people. And those who raise walls will end up as slaves within the very walls they have built. They are left without horizons, for they lack this interchange with others”.²⁴⁶

The building of personal, ideological and even national walls is a fact which humanity is threatened with in our God-given human space. These walls aim directly at permanently eradicating all our claims of interrelatedness and interconnectedness.

ii. Covid-19: Interrelatedness and Interconnectedness

The goal of *Fratelli Tutti* is rallying humanity round the fraternal bond we share as God’s beloved children, especially at the heart of a pandemic caused by a novel coronavirus that was first reported in Wuhan China in on December 31, 2019,²⁴⁷ from where it spread all over the world, forcing a global lockdown from March 2020. The World Health Organization reports that:

²⁴⁶ Francis, §27.

²⁴⁷ World Health Organization (WHO), “WHO Timeline - COVID-19,” April 27, 2020, <https://www.who.int/news/item/27-04-2020-who-timeline---covid-19>.

“Globally, as of 3:52 pm CET, 23 March 2021, there have been 123,419,065 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 2,719,163 deaths, reported to WHO. As of 20 March 2021, a total of 397,950,709 vaccine doses have been administered.”²⁴⁸ As the Holy Father keenly observes,

The Covid-19 pandemic unexpectedly erupted, exposing our false securities. Aside from the different ways that various countries responded to the crisis, their inability to work together became quite evident. For all our hyper-connectivity, we witnessed a fragmentation that made it more difficult to resolve problems that affect us all. Anyone who thinks that the only lesson to be learned was the need to improve what we were already doing, or to refine existing systems and regulations, is denying reality.²⁴⁹

Alas, the coronavirus pandemic has ravished humanity beyond imagination. Creaturehood means neighborhood, community. “True, a worldwide tragedy like the Covid-19 pandemic momentarily revived the sense that we are a global community, all in the same boat, where one person’s problems are the problems of all. Once more we realized that no one is saved alone; we can only be saved together.”²⁵⁰ Jesus used the Samaritan to show us our neighbor, devoid of all the superficial boundaries we have created. Unfortunately, humanity today keeps picking and choosing their ‘neighbor’ on the basis of friends with benefits. However, Covid-19 has become our neighbor today, breaking all national boundaries. The Coronavirus is now reordering world affairs. As the Corona pandemic rages, families are increasingly being deprived of livelihood, life is practically shutting down or at best operating at half-mast; like Christ said, we do not know when the end will come. What have we done to the world? Does Francis think we are offsetting the balance of creation?

If everything is connected, it is hard to imagine that this global disaster is unrelated to our way of approaching reality, our claim to be absolute masters of our own lives and of all that exists. I do not want to speak of divine retribution,

²⁴⁸ World Health Organization (WHO), “WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard,” March 23, 2021, <https://covid19.who.int>.

²⁴⁹ Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §7.

²⁵⁰ Francis, §32.

nor would it be sufficient to say that the harm we do to nature is itself the punishment for our offences. The world is itself crying out in rebellion. We are reminded of the well-known verse of the poet Virgil that evokes the “tears of things”, the misfortunes of life and history.²⁵¹

Humanity has hitherto believed itself to become the ultimate reality, the measure of all things, and we have been beating our chest over our incredible human feats. When men built the Titanic, we were confident that not even the gods could sink it. All this while we have been boasting about our nuclear capabilities and the threats of how we can annihilate other “ant” nations. We have been issuing travel bans to beggarly nations and promising economic sanctions to others. Alas, *corona* (Latin = crown) has become the almighty nuclear weapon unleashed on all, and even the world powers are cringing at its feet. Corona has become the travel ban that has reduced even those dishing out bans to the ban itself. Corona is sinking the entire global space and the world economy and universal normalcy.

Corona is teaching us two things: First, it has burst our balloon of confidence and mastery over everything so we’re being told in our reign over God’s universe, “Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed” (Job 38:11). Second, it has shown that we cannot do without each other and exposed the depth of human interrelatedness and interdependence, our default *imago Trinitatis*, no matter the lost corner of the globe you exist.

iii. Community of Belonging

I have been fascinated by the German word *gehört*. It expresses two not-often-connected realities in English, belonging and listening, and it has made me realize how related these two concepts are. While *gehört* translates as *belonging* in the present tense (to belong to someone or something: I belong to), it also means *listening* in the past/perfect tense (to have listened: I

²⁵¹ Francis, §34.

listened; I did listen; I have listened). When the Gospels tell us that Mary listened and gave her *fiat* to God's Word brought to her by the Angel Gabriel, we also deduce her recognition of belonging to God. Her listening betrays her belonging to God. In John 10: 27-30, Jesus said: "The sheep that belong to me listen to my voice." So *belonging to* connotes *listening to*, and thus our community of belonging also translates into a community of listening to each other if either of these concepts is to be valid. In this sense, we can only truly belong to the "community of creation" when we truly listen to the "cry of the earth and the cry of the poor." For Pope Francis, belongingness does not abolish uniqueness; the belonging components retain their peculiarities but through listening, a collective idea or identity is forged. He expresses this as a melody, citing Irenaeus, and I find it really profound:

Saint Irenaeus would use the image of a melody to make the same point: 'One who seeks the truth should not concentrate on the differences between one note and another, thinking as if each was created separately and apart from the others; instead, he should realize that one and the same person composed the entire melody',²⁵²

In advocating for a community of belonging and solidarity, Pope Francis also talks about migration and xenophobia, lamenting the "absence of human dignity on the borders." The Pope's words summarized my own experience in the Fall of 2019 when I landed in America from Nigeria to pursue my scholarship offer at Boston College. As a fresh student to the United States, I arrived in America with enthusiasm and some apprehension as well. Many years ago, my cousin told me how he was pulled aside in the UK at the airport (I cannot remember exactly). He was moving with the crowd to board, was a UK citizen by birth, and was dressed in a suit and tie. But he was black. The police pulled him aside for random checks; all the whites around him were passing freely, even those dressed like gangsters or other forms. I was always hearing such

²⁵² Francis, §58.

tales from those who had been to the Western world. That was my first Western visit. I successfully and rather briskly went through arrivals and customs and so my apprehension relaxed. Approaching the airport exit after I had retrieved my luggage, I heaved a sigh of relief, glad I did not experience all that. And that was when it happened.

As the crowd was thronging past the last post with some officers standing by idly, all arriving passengers, mostly white, casually walking by the post apparently unobserved and heading onto the street, an officer beckoned to me to stop, took a glance at my passport and wedged me into another section for secondary inspection. I feared deportation because I had heard tales that I had thought were exaggerated, but I saw them play out before me. Getting to the additional screening section, another officer again took my passport and saw my country. He handed it over to yet another officer with a smirk on his face and spat out to the officer: “Nigeria!” They had this glee like officers on duty roused by a 911 call reporting ongoing robbery within their patrol block. I was a suspect at first glance because of my color. The euphemism given to this racial torment is “random search”. It was traumatic. The person who came to pick me up from the airport told me months later that I was very cold and psychologically withdrawn at the reception area when I emerged. I froze from the trauma, even into the early periods of my studies. I found myself looking over my shoulders.

Considering a model for human relationships, Francis juxtaposes the reply of Cain to God after Cain had killed Abel, murderously retorting “Am I my brother’s keeper?”, with the story of the Good Samaritan in the Gospel. For Francis, “The Book of Job sees our origin in the one Creator as the basis of certain common rights: ‘Did not he who made me in the womb also make him?

And did not the same one fashion us in the womb?’ (Job 31:15).”²⁵³ The Pontiff also has a beautiful message on how we use social media and technology to delete people whom we feel are not fit to share our space, the same way we deplete the fragile resources of the earth: “Persons or situations we find unpleasant or disagreeable are simply deleted in today’s virtual networks; a virtual circle is then created, isolating us from the real world in which we are living.”²⁵⁴ With our gadgets and applications, we create a world without people.

d. Francis’ Integral Ecology: Towards a Catholic Theology of Creation

Pope Francis is unequivocal about the kind of ecology he is advocating for – an ecology that features “concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace.”²⁵⁵ He summarizes his vision of an integral ecology: “Since everything is closely interrelated, and today’s problems call for a vision capable of taking into account every aspect of the global crisis, I suggest that we now consider some elements of an integral ecology, one which clearly respects its human and social dimensions.”²⁵⁶ This is a theocentric ecology that recalls the natural order instituted at creation, for “through the greatness and the beauty of creatures one comes to know by analogy their maker” (Wis 13:5).²⁵⁷ This creation theology about nature leading us to God echoes the lines St Thomas Aquinas uses in his *Quinque viæ* to prove the existence of God.²⁵⁸ Appreciating the efforts of those who strive to protect our universe and ameliorate the sad effects of environmental degradation on the world’s poorest, the Pope makes an urgent appeal for renewed and inclusive dialogue, highlighting:

²⁵³ Francis, §58.

²⁵⁴ Francis, §47.

²⁵⁵ Francis, *Laudato Si’*, §10.

²⁵⁶ Francis, §137.

²⁵⁷ Francis, *Laudato Si’*, §12.

²⁵⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, ed. John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcón, trans. Laurence Shapcote, Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas, Volume 13-20 (Lander, Wyoming: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012), I, q. 2, a. 3.

the intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet, the conviction that everything in the world is connected, the critique of new paradigms and forms of power derived from technology, the call to seek other ways of understanding the economy and progress, the value proper to each creature, the human meaning of ecology, the need for forthright and honest debate, the serious responsibility of international and local policy, the throwaway culture and the proposal of a new lifestyle.²⁵⁹

He calls for ecological conversion and recommends lines of approach and action. The holy pastor exhorts: “Concern for the environment thus needs to be joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society.”²⁶⁰ Above all, he explains the true situation of the scriptures with regard to our contemporary ecological crises, in a way consistent with Augustine. From his reflection,

inadequate presentation of Christian anthropology gave rise to a wrong understanding of the relationship between human beings and the world. Often, what was handed on was a Promethean vision of mastery over the world, which gave the impression that the protection of nature was something that only the faint-hearted cared about. Instead, our “dominion” over the universe should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship.²⁶¹

We shall now look at what Francis proposes for natural ecology, human ecology and their implications for a universal communion.

i. Natural Ecology

Natural ecology is all about the relationship between society and nature. It concerns the relationship between the different components of the living world and their respective environments. Pope Francis’ conception of natural ecology is predicated on his understanding of the primordial goodness of creation. He holds it as important for ecosystems “not only to

²⁵⁹ Francis, *Laudato Si’*, §16.

²⁶⁰ Francis, §91.

²⁶¹ Francis, §116.

determine how best to use them, but also because they have an intrinsic value independent of their usefulness.”²⁶² Thus this section dwells on creation care and the sacramentality of creation.

1. Creation Care

Francis sees the creation accounts as thrusting the care of God’s creation on man. He expounds on the biblical injunction “to ‘till and keep’ the garden of the world (cf. Gen 2:15). ‘Tilling’ refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while ‘keeping’ means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving. This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature.”²⁶³ He dutifully responds to the charge that Judeo-Christian dominion thinking is the bane of ecological sustenance, labeling it as an incorrect interpretation of the scriptures. Being created in the image of God and being granted dominion over the earth does not entail absolute domination or exploitation of other creatures, much less of fellow human beings less privileged, for “we are not God.”²⁶⁴ We are all creatures. On the contrary, God’s laws explicitly enshrine the proper relationships among human beings as well as with other species:

“You shall not see your brother’s donkey or his ox fallen down by the way and withhold your help... If you chance to come upon a bird’s nest in any tree or on the ground, with young ones or eggs and the mother sitting upon the young or upon the eggs; you shall not take the mother with the young” (Dt 22:4, 6). Along these same lines, rest on the seventh day is meant not only for human beings, but also so “that your ox and your donkey may have rest” (Ex 23:12). Clearly, the Bible has no place for a tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned for other creatures.”²⁶⁵

Francis maintains that we are part of creation and we constantly interact with creation. The deterioration of the universe concomitantly also means the deterioration of human well-being.

²⁶² Francis, 140.

²⁶³ Francis, *Laudato Si’*, §67.

²⁶⁴ Francis, §67.

²⁶⁵ Francis, §68.

2. Sacramentality of Creation

The intrinsic goodness of creation confers on the material world a value transcending immediate realities. Creation not only invites us to wonder and praise of the Creator but also mediates our worship of God. According to Francis, “The Sacraments are a privileged way in which nature is taken up by God to become a means of mediating supernatural life. Through our worship of God, we are invited to embrace the world on a different plane. Water, oil, fire and colors are taken up in all their symbolic power and incorporated in our act of praise.”²⁶⁶ Water which signifies life and cleansing is used for baptism. We use bread and wine for the Eucharist. Oil is used for sacred ordination. The sacramentality of creation points to the supernatural value creation possesses.

Sacramentality deals with the notion of reality as an instrument of divine self-revelation and communication. The Catholic scholar Kevin Irwin makes it clear that: “*Sacramentality* is the underlying substratum always at work in the celebration of liturgy and the sacraments. Liturgy is ecology in practice, and ecology is celebrated in and through the liturgy.”²⁶⁷ Due to our finitude, we cannot meet God where and how he is; we meet him where and how he comes to meet us; we encounter him not as he is in himself but in finite ways perceptible to humans. This process of unveiling and encountering is sacramental in character because of the mediation, the symbolic representation. The word *Sacrament* means *Sacramentum* in Latin and is translated in Greek as *Mysterion*. The definition of sacrament the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* captures this mystery: “The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace instituted by Christ and entrusted to the

²⁶⁶ Francis, §235.

²⁶⁷ Irwin, *Commentary on Laudato Si'*, viii.

Church by which divine life is dispensed to us.”²⁶⁸ The climax of our sacramental encounter with God is the incarnation of Christ. The Word took flesh; God became matter; the Creator assumed creaturehood.

ii. Human Ecology

Pope Francis is particularly interested in ushering in a new world order where human beings are not thingified but dignified as befitting our status of *imago Dei*. *Laudato Si'* occupies a distinctive place in ecotheology as it considers not just the non-human aspects of creation, but also humanity inclusive as part of God's creation also needing our attention, because the same forces responsible for the exploitation and degrading of creation are also responsible for the exploitation and degrading of human beings. Just like the rest of creation, humanity also bears the brunt of oppression at the hands of fellow humankind. Indeed, *homo homini lupus*: humankind is wolf to humankind.

Consequently, Francis cautions against leveling all living beings on the same plane and is careful not to deprive humans of their special worth and responsibility. Similarly, we should guard against divinizing the earth which would prevent working on it and protecting its fragility. He rightly observes the

obsession with denying any pre-eminence to the human person; more zeal is shown in protecting other species than in defending the dignity which all human beings share in equal measure. Certainly, we should be concerned lest other living beings be treated irresponsibly. But we should be particularly indignant at the enormous inequalities in our midst, whereby we continue to tolerate some considering themselves more worthy than others. We fail to see that some are mired in desperate and degrading poverty, with no way out, while others have not the faintest idea of what to do with their possessions, vainly showing off their

²⁶⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City; Washington, D.C.: Libreria Editrice Vaticana; Distributed by United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2019), §1131.

supposed superiority and leaving behind them so much waste which, if it were the case everywhere, would destroy the planet.²⁶⁹

We shall review Francis' submission on human ecology under three considerations: cultural violence, cultural ecology and the principle of the common good.

1. Cultural Violence

Francis uses the concept of culture to portray ideology or *Weltanschauung*. Condemning the modern forms of “cultural colonization”, he states:

Local conflicts and disregard for the common good are exploited by the global economy in order to impose a single cultural model. This culture unifies the world, but divides persons and nations, for “as society becomes ever more globalized, it makes us neighbors, but does not make us brothers”. We are more alone than ever in an increasingly massified world that promotes individual interests and weakens the communitarian dimension of life.²⁷⁰

Johan Galtung, Norwegian “Father of Peace Studies”²⁷¹ identifies a three-pronged progression of violence in his studies on culturology, science of human culture, using a subdivision of culture into six domains: religion and ideology, art and language, and empirical and formal science.²⁷²

The three levels of violence are direct violence, structural violence and cultural violence. Direct violence refers to outright killing or maiming, and it is for only a short duration. Structural violence has to do with exploitation, and this “leaves marks not only on the human body but also on the spirit.”²⁷³ Structural violence makes use of euphemisms such as “unequal exchange” and “sustainable economic growth.” Cultural violence then means “those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence – exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art,

²⁶⁹ Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §90.

²⁷⁰ Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §12.

²⁷¹ Johan Galtung and Dietrich Fischer, “Johan Galtung, the Father of Peace Studies,” in *Johan Galtung: Pioneer of Peace Research*, ed. Johan Galtung and Dietrich Fischer, SpringerBriefs on Pioneers in Science and Practice (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer, 2013), 3–23, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-32481-9_1.

²⁷² Johan Galtung, “Cultural Violence,” *Journal of Peace Research* 27, no. 3 (August 1990): 291–305, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343390027003005>.

²⁷³ Galtung, 294.

empirical science and formal science (logic, mathematics) – that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence.”²⁷⁴ Galtung goes on to list as examples of cultural violence: stars, crosses, crescents, flags, anthems, military parades as well as inflammatory speeches and posters. For him, “direct violence is an event; structural violence is a process with ups and downs; cultural violence is an invariant, a ‘permanence’.”²⁷⁵ Using concrete examples of slavery and racism, he refers to the capturing and trafficking of Africans across the Atlantic to work as slaves, killing millions of them in the process, as direct violence. The ensuing slavery and discrimination he qualifies as structural violence. He then sees the perennial racism and prejudice, including the sanitation of language or labels now employed as cultural violence. “How about violence against nature?” he asks.²⁷⁶ He labels slashing and burning as direct violence which progresses into the structural violence of pollution and depletion of nature as a result of industrialization, commercialization and transformation of nature by humankind. In the same vein, he submits that “the buzzword ‘sustainable economic growth’ may yet be another form of cultural violence.” Galtung further explains that cultural violence legitimizes and renders acceptable in the society, both “the act of direct violence and the fact of structural violence,” by “changing the moral color of an act” as well as by “making reality opaque.”²⁷⁷ Thus he calls for “eco-balance” because if ecological degradation is “not satisfied, the result is human degradation.”²⁷⁸ For Francis therefore, we are living in an era of cultural absolutism where the interests of a limited few become the absolute measure. This is the seedbed of cultural violence. Hence, he offers us a cultural ecology.

²⁷⁴ Galtung, 291.

²⁷⁵ Galtung, 294.

²⁷⁶ Galtung, 294.

²⁷⁷ Galtung, 292.

²⁷⁸ Galtung, 292.

2. Cultural Ecology

Cultural ecology seeks to create a level playfield for all peoples and cultures, irrespective of peculiar strengths and level of development. It hopes to respect and advance the cultural heritage and identity of the subgroups comprising the human community. According to Francis,

Ecology, then, also involves protecting the cultural treasures of humanity in the broadest sense. More specifically, it calls for greater attention to local cultures when studying environmental problems, favoring a dialogue between scientific-technical language and the language of the people. Culture is more than what we have inherited from the past; it is also, and above all, a living, dynamic and participatory present reality, which cannot be excluded as we rethink the relationship between human beings and the environment.²⁷⁹

The Pontiff draws our attention to a growing loss of a proper sense of history especially among the youth, aided by modern “deconstructionism”²⁸⁰ which tries to destroy the peculiarities and patrimony of a given people. The agenda of this denial of cultural history is to blur the differences between cultures and create a monstrous global culture that renders other cultures inferior and subservient. The diversity of cultures should be respected and preserved. Also, the ecological patrimony of different cultures should be studied more and harnessed as we seek solutions to our ecological crises. The memories of each culture should be cherished based on the good found in respective cultures.

3. Principle of Common Good

Foundational to the principle of the common good are respect for the human person, advancement of societal welfare, maintaining the principle of subsidiarity, promotion of the family as well as social order and distributive justice.²⁸¹ This ethical “imperative to love and care

²⁷⁹ Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §143.

²⁸⁰ Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §13.

²⁸¹ Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §157.

for others” is underscored by the golden rule which commands us not to do to others what we would not want to be done to us (cf. Tob. 4:15; Matt. 7:12).²⁸² Francis then asserts that: “An integral ecology is inseparable from the notion of the common good, a central and unifying principle of social ethics. The common good is ‘the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment.’”²⁸³ Whenever common good is threatened, violence ensues. This principle enjoins solidarity with the poor, protection of human rights and a preferential option of the poor.

iii. Universal Communion

Having followed Francis’ creation theology thus far, we can better understand his assessment of our ecological crisis that: “We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.”²⁸⁴ Only a universal communion can guarantee this vision, through fraternal care, option for the poor and solidarity without borders.

1. Fraternal Care

Francis repeatedly drives home the claim that the real Christian integral ecology is where neither individual human being nor created entity is neglected, scorned or exploited. There is a scene in the novel, *The Thorn Birds*, on a sheep farm where a polished visitor is horrified and calls for legal action against locals who live on the farm, for “grazier cruelty”. One of the local characters retorts sarcastically: “Down in the city they don’t know how the other half lives, and they can

²⁸² Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §59.

²⁸³ Francis, *Laudato Si’*, §156.

²⁸⁴ Francis, §139.

afford the luxury of doting on their animals as if they were children. Out here it's different. You'll never see man, woman or child in need of help go ignored out here, yet in the city those same people who dote on their pets will completely ignore a cry of help from a human being.”²⁸⁵ The Pope advises against this attitude of playing the ostrich when it comes to a certain segment of creation, whether humanity or the rest of the created world. That would be superfluous. For him, “everything is connected. Concern for the environment thus needs to be joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society.” That is to say that our “sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings. It is clearly inconsistent to combat trafficking in endangered species while remaining completely indifferent to human trafficking, unconcerned about the poor, or undertaking to destroy another human being deemed unwanted.”²⁸⁶ Universal fraternity is a basic principle of social life.²⁸⁷ Under this principle, social friendship and human promotion are inalienable ecological currencies.

2. Option for the Poor

Francis reflects on “the intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet.”²⁸⁸ His ecology is not only an environmental ecology but most importantly a pastoral ecology as well. Care of creation is not mutually exclusive to care for the poor. Rather, making a compassionate option for the poor is key to rediscovering our beguiled humanity. He toes the line of John Paul II in his encyclical letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, that “the option or love of preference for the poor... is an option, or a special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian

²⁸⁵ Colleen MacCullough, *The Thorn Birds* (New York: Avon, 1978), 247.

²⁸⁶ Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §91.

²⁸⁷ Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §106.

²⁸⁸ Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §16.

charity, to which the whole tradition of the Church bears witness.”²⁸⁹ Recounting how he came about the name Francis as his papal name, Pope Francis says of St Francis of Assisi:

For me, he is the man of poverty, the man of peace, the man who loves and protects creation; these days we do not have a very good relationship with creation, do we? He is the man who gives us this spirit of peace, the poor man.... How I would like a Church which is poor and for the poor!²⁹⁰

From the inception of his papacy, Francis has consistently preached care of creation including humanity, and a poor Church for the poor. María Teresa Dávila aptly captures this sense of Francis: “Francis’s environmental encyclical offers little distinction between justice for the poor and vulnerable and care of creation. The two are intimately linked throughout in ways that challenge previous notions of complicity and economic and social conflict in Catholic social teaching.”²⁹¹ He merges these two concerns in *Laudato Si’* in order to show that the Christian concern for the poor of the earth and the poor earth is not plural or mutually exclusive but one vocation: solidarity and justice for suffering humanity and suffering creation.

3. Solidarity without Borders

Francis calls for a new dialogue regarding the poor and the rest of creation. The solidarity he envisages transcends all artificial boundaries, save the sole boundary of our interconnectedness and interrelatedness by virtue of having one and the same Creator as the beginning and end of all. He makes a sweeping case:

I urgently appeal, then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and

²⁸⁹ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis: On Social Concern*. (Boston, MA: StPaul Books & Media, 1988), §42.

²⁹⁰ Andrea Tornielli and Giacomo Galeazzi, *This Economy Kills: Pope Francis on Capitalism and Social Justice*, trans. Demetrio S. Yocum (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2015), 2.

²⁹¹ María Teresa Dávila, “The Option for the Poor in *Laudato Si’*: Connecting Care of Creation with Care for the Poor,” in *The Theological and Ecological Vision of Laudato Si’: Everything Is Connected*, ed. Vincent Jude Miller (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017), 149.

affect us all. The worldwide ecological movement has already made considerable progress and led to the establishment of numerous organizations committed to raising awareness of these challenges. Regrettably, many efforts to seek concrete solutions to the environmental crisis have proved ineffective, not only because of powerful opposition but also because of a more general lack of interest. Obstructionist attitudes, even on the part of believers, can range from denial of the problem to indifference, nonchalant resignation or blind confidence in technical solutions. We require a new and universal solidarity.... All of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements and talents.²⁹²

The interruptive posture of the Good Samaritan is Francis' model for such solidarity that counts neither boundary nor cost. *Médecins Sans Frontières* (Doctors without Borders), an international medical humanitarian organization that treats people where the need is greatest, comes to mind here. This is also the point where the Holy Father links ecology, migration, economics and politics. An integral ecology that goes beyond mere natural or human ecology cannot be attained without a proper sense of solidarity confounding geographical, ideological, biological and sociopolitical borders.

Conclusion:

That this encyclical is indeed a *Magna Carta* for an authentic Christian ecotheology is attested to by the writings of numerous Christian scholars. As Anthony Kelly puts it, "The encyclical itself is a game-changer, in terms of Catholic teaching and its dialogue with science, and in the field of ecumenical and even interreligious collaboration and communication."²⁹³ For Keith Chappell, "the most significant aspect of the encyclical is that an integral approach to what are the joint issues of social and environmental justice is recognized," and the conflict between the human and ecological is sufficiently diffused, while establishing "that a genuine search for the best for

²⁹² Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §14.

²⁹³ Anthony Kelly, *An Integral Ecology and the Catholic Vision* (Hindmarsh, Australia: ATF Press, 2016), 1.

one involves seeking the best for all, both human and non-human.”²⁹⁴ This encyclical is really a right step in the right direction as it campaigned for “justice for the poor, endorsed consensus science regarding anthropogenic climate disruption, and called for a global ‘ecological conversion’ toward social justice, environmental sustainability, and the preservation of both biological and cultural diversity.”²⁹⁵ Nonetheless, Jenkins feels the encyclical did not follow through on the fine foundation it laid. Having requalified the meaning of dominion as well as ecologically expanded human dignity, both arguments portray the kinship image of Earth crying out to humans. “However, the political consequences of those shifts remain vague because the ‘voice’ of Earth remains silent in crucial loci of the encyclical’s argument.”²⁹⁶

In propounding an ecological education and spirituality, *Laudato Si’* preaches a new lifestyle of reinvigorated political, economic and social responsibility, even at the risk of short-term deprivations, to achieve better livelihood and a better environment. Seeking a radical covenant between humanity and the environment, the Pope passionately preaches ecological conversion, which would usher in joy, peace and civic and political love and tolerance, as well as mutual conviviality. The Holy Father builds upon the work of his predecessors in setting forth a charter of an integral Christian ecology, which is at once “cosmocentric, theocentric and anthropocentric.”²⁹⁷

²⁹⁴ Keith Chappell, “An Ecologist’s Perspective on *Laudato Si’*”, in Mary E. Mills editor, John Arthur Orr editor, and Harry Schnitker editor, *Reflections on Pope Francis’s Encyclical, Laudato Si’* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 16–17.

²⁹⁵ Taylor, Van Wieren, and Zaleha, “The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part Two),” 307.

²⁹⁶ Willis Jenkins, “The Mysterious Silence of Mother Earth in *Laudato Si’*: The Mysterious Silence of Mother Earth,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 46, no. 3 (September 2018): 441, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jore.12226>.

²⁹⁷ Mondin, *Philosophical Anthropology*, 14.

Above all, Pope Francis turns our gaze to our vocation as protectors, and he presents St Joseph as the model in the vocation of being a protector. In his homily at the inaugural Mass of his Pontificate, Francis sums up this primary vocation:

Joseph is a ‘protector’.... In him, dear friends, we learn how to respond to God's call, readily and willingly, but we also see the core of the Christian vocation, which is Christ! Let us protect Christ in our lives, so that we can protect others, so that we can protect creation!

The vocation of being a ‘protector’, however, is not just something involving us Christians alone; it also has a prior dimension which is simply human, involving everyone. It means protecting all creation, the beauty of the created world, as the Book of Genesis tells us and as Saint Francis of Assisi showed us. It means respecting each of God's creatures and respecting the environment in which we live. It means protecting people, showing loving concern for each and every person, especially children, the elderly, those in need, who are often the last we think about.... Be protectors of God's gifts!²⁹⁸

He exhorts “all those who have positions of responsibility in economic, political and social life, and all men and women of goodwill: let us be ‘protectors’ of creation, protectors of God's plan inscribed in nature, protectors of one another and of the environment.”²⁹⁹ Finally, Francis takes this call to a whole new level by issuing the Apostolic Letter *Patris Corde*³⁰⁰ declaring this year as a “Year of Saint Joseph” from 8 December 2020 to 8 December 2021. So from St Francis to St Augustine and even St Joseph, Catholic theology is enriched with pragmatic ecological motivations as presented by Scripture, Tradition and the *Magisterium* of the Church. The social teachings of the Catholic Church consistently exhort humankind to appreciate and live out this integral creation theology irrespective of credal, cultural, political or geographic affiliations.

²⁹⁸ Catherine Harmon, “Pope Francis’ Homily for His Inaugural Mass,” March 19, 2013, 2, <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2013/03/19/full-text-pope-francis-homily-for-his-inaugural-mass/>.

²⁹⁹ Harmon, 2.

³⁰⁰ Francis, “Patris Corde,” Apostolic Letter, December 8, 2020, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap_20201208_patis-corde.html.

3. Chapter Three: Towards a Nigerian Ecotheology: A Practical Theological Approach

Nigeria is famously known for its abundant petroleum reserves. Petroleum constitutes about 90% of Nigeria's revenue. Unfortunately, this blessing can hardly be said to have gone down the national food chain. The paradox of this 'resource curse' is evident in many sectors of the Nigerian space, chief of which is the perpetuated ecological crisis in the Niger Delta region. This region is the source of Nigeria's oil wealth but has become an ecological emergency over the years. Alarmed individuals and relevant bodies, local and global, have continued to call attention to the environmental degradation of the region. The situation has also brought untold suffering to the people inhabiting the region. Both habitation and source of livelihood for the poor indigenes are being ravaged. In truth, beyond Nigeria, the ecological crisis has been identified as the most pressing concern for Africa as the continent has become home to natural and human-made environmental wreckage, mostly avoidable.³⁰¹ The theological concerns of this crisis however have not received much attention in these discussions. Seeking to promote a proper theology of creation in Nigeria, and by implication Africa generally, this study, therefore, brings the ecological crises in the Niger Delta region into focus. Hence the author pursues these research questions: Is there a valid theology of creation for Africa? What are the identifiable problems in Nigeria vis-à-vis the theology of creation? Why is the Nigerian situation persistent? What eco-theological concerns are raised considering the Niger Delta situation? How can the theology of creation be appropriated to the flourishing of life in Nigeria, particularly the Niger Delta? The aim of this research is to contribute towards building a Nigerian eco-theology to help resolve the humanitarian crises in the Niger Delta. Nonetheless, the paper constructively invites the African Church into these discussions. Very importantly, Chris Manus and Des Obioma ask a question

³⁰¹ Joseph Kiso Masika, "Doing Ecology with African Creation Wisdom," *Didache: Faithful Teaching* 12, no. 1 (2012): 1.

critical to greening the African Church: “What are African Christians and church communities doing to convince their followers to begin to work against the impending doom that may arise from human negligence, degradation, pollution and the exploitation of creation?”³⁰² The duo is convinced that the path to achieving this is through practical theology, with the environment as a *locus theologicus*.

This study therefore draws upon the tools and methodologies of Practical Theology in assessing the situation, identifying the challenges and finally offering practical recommendations to promote the flourishing of life in the Niger Delta. The research reveals that the face of creation in Nigeria has not been diligently preserved, highlighting the players in the ensuing ecological crises, chiefly the government and the multinational oil corporations. Corruption, inadequate ecological consciousness and lack of a theological framework are identified as the root causes of the ecological disaster the region has become. This resounds with other scholars who have also declared our injudicious values and attitudes towards creation to be the root cause of the ecological crisis we face.³⁰³ The theological relevance of this exercise is the author’s reflection on our divine vocation as stewards of God’s creation, not marauders. Consequently, this exposition advocates for transparent accountability and practical legislation to curb the ecological mayhem going on in the oil drilling areas of Nigeria. The ultimate goal is the flourishing of creation in Nigeria. The author hopes that the findings of this paper will both heal the wounded memories as well as proffer sincere peace, development and fulfillment to the peoples of the Niger Delta.

³⁰² Manus and Obioma, “Preaching the ‘Green Gospel’ in Our Environment,” 2.

³⁰³ Manus and Obioma, 2.

a. Doing Practical Theology

What has theology got to do with the situation we live in? Should there be any connection between theology and the signs of the times? Johann Baptist Metz responds that theology must engage the existential realities of the times. He recounts his Copernican point in theology as the situation *after Auschwitz* and condemns “every situationless talk about God.”³⁰⁴ Metz is passionate that Christian faith and theology must be in relation to world history and the future of humanity, and does not seem to separate political theology from eschatology, as against the old theological cosmology. He highlights the responsibility of theology in responding to memories of human atrocities and planning the future of our crisis-ridden technological society.³⁰⁵

Corroborating this, Jon Sobrino defines the locus of salvation as the poor and marginalised, whom theology must liberate. In his monumental work, *No Salvation Outside the Poor*, he presents the dialectics between *extra pauperes nulla salus* and *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, with emphasis on the fundamental option for the poor.³⁰⁶ In addition, Sobrino clarifies the fundamental concern and object of the theology of liberation, and indeed every theology, as the reality of suffering in our world; to provide a response to such suffering – to eradicate suffering. He also indicates that there could be other theologies but they must have this singular concern – liberation.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁴ Johann Baptist Metz, *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 54–56.

³⁰⁵ Johann Baptist Metz, *Theology of the World*, trans. William Glen-Doepel (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), 141.

³⁰⁶ Jon Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2008), 59.

³⁰⁷ Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994), 45.

i. Theological Validity of This Project

Beyond the task of theology in addressing social realities, a theological assessment becomes more urgent when religion itself is fingered as culprit in the social malaise. Lynn White argued about fifty years ago that the Christian tradition has engineered anthropocentric and anti-environmental attitudes and practices, resulting in the current spate of ecological tsunami bedeviling us. Notably he avers that: “Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not.”³⁰⁸ This highly provocative and heavily debated verdict on Christianity midwifed theology into an ecological era. There are two reasons for this turn to religion. First is the failure of science so far to bring the ecological ship to berth: “It is a well-known fact that science and environmental activists have failed to convince the world of its responsibility to the need for an attitudinal change towards the environment.”³⁰⁹ The second reason for this current reliance on religion to heal our ecosystem is hinged on the acknowledgement of our ecological crisis as a moral issue as well as the controversial role of religion in fostering certain progressive attitudes which have been identified as the roots of the ecological problem. As Birute Briliute indicates, “*Laudato Si*’ focuses on social, moral, educational and theological aspects of the present global ecological crisis. He does not believe that the positive change in global ecology is possible without a change in each person’s heart.”³¹⁰ This section shows how the Church’s ecological gospel can be appropriated to Nigeria.

³⁰⁸ White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” 1207.

³⁰⁹ Manus and Obioma, “Preaching the ‘Green Gospel’ in Our Environment,” 3.

³¹⁰ Birute Briliute, “The Catechism of the Catholic Church and *Laudato Si*’,” in *Reflections on Pope Francis’s Encyclical, Laudato Si*’, ed. Mary E. Mills, John Arthur Orr, and Harry Schnitker (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 101.

ii. Methodological Commitments

Teresa Okure notes that Africans “do not as a cultural rule start with the issue of methodology. Their primary consciousness in doing theology is not method but life and life concerns, their own and those of their own peoples.”³¹¹ Having laid out these concerns therefore, we make haste to indicate our methodological approach. For its method, this study is engaged with attentiveness to context and local knowledge which addresses the memories of suffering amidst plenty. It also applies an interdisciplinary method stretching across scripture, tradition, ecology, eschatology, environmental ethics, economics, history, culture, and above all, the theology of creation. Biblical imagination is one of the features of this work. Most importantly, the essay methodologically seeks transformative effect, evoking practical theological agency for the sake of flourishing life.

iii. Tools for the Task

To achieve its methodical commitments, this paper employs relevant tools for this theological engagement, chief of which is social analysis. As Maria Cimperman x-rays, “social analysis helps us understand the historical and structural issues at work in situations that may need transformation.”³¹² By doing a proper social analysis of the situation at hand, drawn largely from the current state of affairs, the author invites us into the deep stories of the Niger Delta people. We see this vital tool employed in *Laudato Si’* where “Pope Francis insists upon the importance of a social analysis of the problem followed by a sound theological reflection on how the

³¹¹ Teresa Okure, “Feminist Interpretations in Africa,” in *Searching the Scriptures. Volume One, A Feminist Introduction*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 77.

³¹² Maria Cimperman, *Social Analysis for the 21st Century: How Faith Becomes Action* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2015), 80.

situation could be improved.”³¹³ This thesis also employs the see-judge-act pastoral cycle model of social analysis which Francis adopts in fidelity to traditional Catholic social teaching. Applying this model enables us to understand, discern and respond to the signs of the times.³¹⁴ In *Mater et Magistra*, John XXIII lauds this model of social engagement:

There are three stages, which should normally be followed in the reduction of social principles into practice. First, one reviews the concrete situation; secondly, one forms a judgement on it in the light of these same principles; thirdly, one decides what in the circumstances can and should be done to implement these principles. These are the three stages that are usually expressed in the three terms: observe, judge, act.³¹⁵

Furthermore, in its cultural considerations, this paper also shares some practical cultural means of resolving the situation based on its findings. Capping the investigations with the tool of theological reflection, the author brings an African theology of creation to bear on the ecological crises in the Niger Delta, thus contributing to building an effective Nigerian eco-theology. Above all, the study underscores the relevance of faith sharing in diffusing the ecological storms plaguing the region, thereby adopting the tool of shared Christian praxis. Riding on the principle of solidarity, the writer offers an eco-theological response to the humanitarian crises in Nigeria.

b. The Nigerian Situation

*Did you ever stop to notice
All the blood we've shed before?
Did you ever stop to notice
This crying Earth, these weeping shores?
What have we done to the world?
Look what we've done
(Earth Song by Michael Jackson)*³¹⁶

³¹³ Briliute, “The Catechism of the Catholic Church and Laudato Si’,” 101.

³¹⁴ Kureethadam, *The Ten Green Commandments of Laudato Si’*.

³¹⁵ John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra: Encyclical Letter of His Holiness Pope John XXIII on Christianity and Social Progress* (Washington, D.C., Washington: National Catholic Welfare Conference, 1961), §236.

³¹⁶ Michael Jackson, *Earth Song*, 1995, <https://genius.com/Michael-jackson-earth-song-lyrics>.

Nigeria is a very remarkable country with huge prospects but low output. With a population of about 202 million people, according to 2019 World Bank statistics,³¹⁷ Nigeria is the most populous Black nation and Africa's largest economy with three major ethnic groups – Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba – and over 250 ethnic groups and languages. English remains the *lingua franca* though. Spanning a total area of 923,768 sq. km (land: 910,768 sq. km; water: 13,000 sq. km), twice the land size of California, this large West African nation is bordered by the Gulf of Guinea and wedged between Benin and Cameroon. Nigeria is a multi-religious and culturally diverse federation comprising 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory. The religious map is about 45% Christians, 45% Muslims plus about 10% other religions mostly indigenous. The north is majorly Muslim while the south has more Christians. Nigeria gained her independence from Britain in 1960 and has seen patches of both military rule and civilian governments.

Nigeria fought a civil war from 1967-1970, also known as the Biafran War, although Nigeria tries to expunge all traces of this sad epoch from the history books today. One of the reasons for this war was control of the oil in the Eastern region. It is estimated that over one million Biafran children were killed by starvation in this genocide which has been likened to the *Auschwitz* of the Nazi Holocaust. The then Eastern region of the country, where the bulk of the oil came from, felt extremely marginalized and unprotected in the country, given the state-backed pogroms in the north where tens of thousands of easterners, made up mostly of the Igbos, were massacred.

The massacres led the Eastern Region of Nigeria to declare its secession from Nigeria. The region was renamed the Republic of Biafra. Nigeria invaded Biafra in July 1967, leading to a protracted war. The federal government used starvation tactics which led to upwards of three million civilian deaths in Biafra. Biafra officially surrendered to Nigeria in January 1970. After its genocidal war, the Nigerian government proceeded to engineer a culture of denial. To counter that propaganda, writers reflecting on that past have often framed the war as genocide.

³¹⁷ The World Bank, "The World Bank In Nigeria: Overview," Text/HTML, World Bank, October 13, 2019, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/nigeria/overview>.

A common feature in the writings is the comparison of Igbo experiences of atrocities to Jewish ones during the Holocaust.³¹⁸

Fifty years on, the ecological, economic and human devastation under the watch of the Nigerian government has only become worse.

i. Giant of Africa

Nigeria is a paradox of a nation. It is one of the wealthiest nations in Africa and at the same time one of the poorest. As Africa's biggest oil exporter with the largest natural gas reserves on the continent, it is indeed puzzling how Nigeria has struggled to clinch the title of poverty capital of the world as of 2018 with about 86.9 million people reportedly living in extreme poverty.³¹⁹ The World Bank ranks Nigeria 152 out of 157 in its 2018 Human Capital Index (HCI).³²⁰ Nigeria is largely dependent on crude oil for its survival and hence suffers sharply from the global meltdown as well as from corrupt and flagrant mismanagement of available resources. The Nigerian currency is the naira (₦) which currently trades against the US dollar at about ₦485/\$1 in the Nigerian black market³²¹ though reported as ₦380/\$1, according to official figures published by the Central Bank of Nigeria.³²² The exchange value ten years ago, January 2011, was ₦151.62/\$1 at the official rate and ₦156.08/\$1 at the black market rate.³²³

The crude oil benchmark for her 2020 budget with production capped at 2.1 million barrels per day was estimated at \$57 per barrel but in these COVID-19 months, oil has been selling for less

³¹⁸ Chigbo Arthur Anyaduba, "Nigerian Writers Compare Genocide of Igbos to the Holocaust," *The Conversation*, accessed May 5, 2020, <http://theconversation.com/nigerian-writers-compare-genocide-of-igbos-to-the-holocaust-110766>.

³¹⁹ Yomi Kazeem, "Nigeria Has Become the Poverty Capital of the World," *Quartz Africa*, June 25, 2018, <https://qz.com/africa/1313380/nigerias-has-the-highest-rate-of-extreme-poverty-globally/>.

³²⁰ The World Bank, *The Human Capital Project* (World Bank, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1596/30498>.

³²¹ AbokiFX, "BDC Exchange Market Rates," March 31, 2021, https://www.abokifx.com/home_bdc_rate.

³²² Central Bank of Nigeria, "Central Bank of Nigeria | Exchange Rate," March 31, 2021, <https://www.cbn.gov.ng/rates/ExchRateByCurrency.asp>.

³²³ Central Bank of Nigeria, "Central Bank of Nigeria: Monthly Average Exchange Rates of the Naira," January 2011, <https://www.cbn.gov.ng/rates/exrate.asp?year=2011>.

than \$20 p/b due to low demand courtesy of the global grounding of economic activities. The federal government had to embark on a second downward review of the 2020 budget benchmark to \$20 p/b in line with market realities.³²⁴ Economic reports indicate that Nigeria is headed for serious economic doom as each subsequent government promises to diversify the economy without any tangible commitment when they get into power. The price keeps crashing and is at best unstable. At some point, Forbes reported that “its price crashed from \$18 a barrel to -\$38, turning negative for the first time on record.”³²⁵

The minimum monthly wage in Nigeria in most states is about ₦18,000 (less than \$50 monthly) and repeated calls by labor unions for the government to increase it to at least ₦30,000 nationwide (still less than \$100 monthly) have not been successful. Nigeria is a bedlam of poverty in the midst of abundance, no thanks to generic maladministration, corruption and other ills. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) reports that:

Despite its strong fundamentals, oil-rich Nigeria has been hobbled by inadequate power supply, lack of infrastructure, delays in the passage of legislative reforms, an inefficient property registration system, restrictive trade policies, an inconsistent regulatory environment, a slow and ineffective judicial system, unreliable dispute resolution mechanisms, insecurity, and pervasive corruption. Regulatory constraints and security risks have limited new investment in oil and natural gas, and Nigeria's oil production had been contracting every year since 2012 until a slight rebound in 2017.³²⁶

The “resource curse” hypothesis propounded by Jeffery Sachs and Andrew Warner is real in Nigeria. Their research found it puzzling that “economies with abundant natural resources have

³²⁴ Ihuoma Chiedozie, “Budget: FG Mulls \$20 Oil Benchmark,” *Punch Newspapers* (blog), May 5, 2020, <https://punchng.com/budget-fg-mulls-20-oil-benchmark/>.

³²⁵ Stephen McBride, “Oil Investors Are Doomed Even If Oil Prices Recover,” *Forbes*, May 4, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stephenmcbride1/2020/05/04/oil-investors-are-doomed-even-if-oil-prices-recover/>.

³²⁶ Central Intelligence Agency, “Africa: Nigeria — The World Factbook,” accessed May 4, 2020, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/print_ni.html.

tended to grow less rapidly than natural-resource-scarce economies.”³²⁷ This is a case of abundant “wealth in natural resources” turning into “a wholesale destruction of economic, social, and political structures, including the undermining of a country’s institutional setup, leading to poverty rather than development.”³²⁸ Agriculture was the backbone of Nigeria’s economy and had a large export of food before the discovery of oil in the 1950s. In the last half-century, the Nigerian oil boom has spelled doom for a nation that prides itself as the giant of Africa. As the world’s sixth-largest exporter of petroleum, producing 4.5 percent of the world’s total production. Over the decades, Nigeria developed a chronic dependence on its “black gold,” which provides 20 percent of its GDP, 95 percent of foreign exchange earnings and nearly 80 percent of government income. The former exporter of food must now import food and almost everything, including its own oil. Nigeria does not have any working refineries to refine its crude oil, so it exports the crude oil and imports the finished products at higher prices like any other non-oil country.

Nigeria is a splendid array of natural habitats. The country derives its name (Niger area, so named by British Flora Shaw, the then-girlfriend of the British colonial governor of Nigeria, Lord Lugard, whom he later married) from its largest river, the Niger River, which flows into the Atlantic Ocean forming the Niger Delta, located in the southernmost part of Nigeria. This is where we have the oil, the blood, and the rape of our ecological habitat.

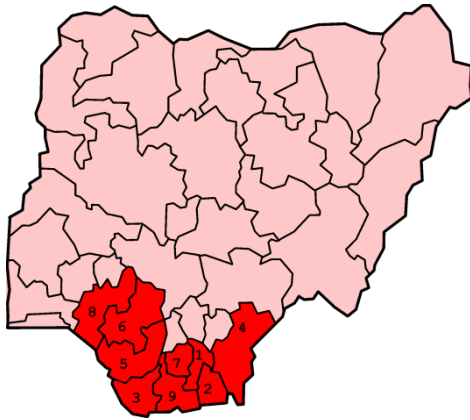
³²⁷ Jeffrey D. Sachs and Andrew M. Warner, “Natural Resource Abundance and Economic Growth,” Working Paper, Working Paper Series (National Bureau of Economic Research, December 1995), 1, <https://doi.org/10.3386/w5398>.

³²⁸ Eyene Okpanachi, “Confronting the Governance Challenges of Developing Nigeria’s Extractive Industry: Policy and Performance in the Oil and Gas Sector.(Report),” *The Review of Policy Research* 28, no. 1 (2011): 26, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-1338.2010.00477.x>.

ii. The Niger Delta

The Niger Delta is the delta of the Niger River sitting directly on the Gulf of Guinea on the Atlantic Ocean in Nigeria. It covers an area of about 70,000 sq. km (larger than the American state of West Virginia) making it the largest river delta in Africa and the third-largest in the world. It comes after Holland and Mississippi as the world's third-largest wetland, consisting of relatively small upland with the rest being riverine fresh and brackish water mangrove swamp hemmed in by sandy coastal ridge barriers. If the map of Nigeria were a 3-D physical model to be buried partly as support for the structure, the Niger Delta would be that protruding tip at the very base that would be buried. The region has indeed been buried to prosper a country that only milks and abuses it for all its worth – its cash cow. Since the discovery of oil in the 1950s, the region has produced all the oil with little or nothing to show for it. Natural life as well as agricultural activities there have been severely compromised with the prolonged pollution of both soil and water for farming and fishing, age-long occupations of the local inhabitants. The region produces about 2.1 million barrels of oil per day but the masses are impoverished and the area is seriously underdeveloped. Rather, the resources from the region are lavished in developing other areas while the politicians and the oil companies have a field day.

iii. Map of Nigeria showing the Niger Delta



Map of Nigeria numerically showing states typically considered part of the Niger Delta region: 1. Abia, 2. Akwa Ibom, 3. Bayelsa, 4. Cross River, 5. Delta, 6. Edo, 7. Imo, 8. Ondo, 9. Rivers (Fig.1).³²⁹ The states are numbered accordingly in the lowest section of the map.

c. Ecological Challenges of the Niger Delta

The arts have always proved to be a great mine for practical theology. I appreciate the works of the legend Michael Jackson in this regard. Jackson has some beautiful ecological renditions including his *Earth Song*, *Heal the World* as well as the USA for Africa piece *We Are the World* which also bears Jackson's signature. *We Are the World* is a charity single performed by forty-seven predominantly U.S. artistes, led by Quincy Jones, Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie in solidarity with the humanitarian crises in Africa, particularly Ethiopia, in 1985. A later version was performed by over 80 more racially and genre-diverse artistes in 2010, twenty-five years after the original, in the same studio as the original, with the same spirit and same energy as the original but now in response to the earthquake in Haiti. These ecologically motivated concerns can be well applied to the situation in the Niger Delta, oil basin of Africa.

³²⁹ Wikipedia, "Niger Delta," in Wikipedia, April 12, 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Niger_Delta&oldid=950508902.

i. Oil Exploration

Oil prospecting and exploration in Nigeria have impacted adversely on the biodiversity of the areas where the oil and gas come from. The persistent environmental pollution arises from leakages of crude oil, natural gas flaring and escape of other chemicals used in petroleum production. None of the triad of air, land and sea is spared in this ecological devastation. As a result, our ecosystem has seen the loss of mangrove forests, water hyacinth invasion as well as the depletion of fish populations. It is estimated that 240,000 barrels of oil are being spilled annually onto the Niger Delta region. Using the Niger Delta as their ecotheological case study, Manus and Obioma lament:

The flaring of gas from the Nigeria oil wells, the constant vandalising of pipe lines, the concomitant inferno and the leaking of toxic gas in Nigeria are causing environmental havoc and inestimable health hazards to the surrounding population. The flow of waste water into rural streams and rivers and the constant blockage of gutters and sewage system in our urban areas with polythene bags have provided breeding grounds for mosquitos to such an extent that the government's aim and its programme 'Roll back malaria' are defeated.³³⁰

A lot of inquests have been carried out in this regard by both public and private sectors. The Guardian newspaper recalls that "prior to the advent of crude oil production, Ogoni people had fishing, farming and trading as their main sources of livelihoods." Regrettably, however, the impunity that has been unleashed through "several years of reckless oil production activities has destroyed the Ogoni ecosystem and their means of livelihoods."³³¹ In a 2020 CFR investigation, John Campbell is alarmed that in the Niger Delta, "the petroleum industry has so polluted the environment that the way local people had traditionally earned their living – fishing and farming – no longer was possible. More generally, there is resentment that the region does not benefit

³³⁰ Manus and Obioma, "Preaching the 'Green Gospel' in Our Environment," 2.

³³¹ Kelvin Ebiri, "Government Prevaricates as Ogoni Feeds on Poisoned Fishes, Drinks Contaminated Water," *The Guardian Nigeria News - Nigeria and World News* (blog), July 16, 2017, <https://guardian.ng/saturday-magazine/cover/government-prevaricates-as-ogoni-feeds-on-poisoned-fishes-drinks-contaminated-water/>.

enough from the oil wealth.”³³² An authoritative report released by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) declared the “contaminated drinking water, land, creeks and important ecosystems such as mangroves” there a matter of immediate emergency:

A major new independent scientific assessment, carried out by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), shows that pollution from over 50 years of oil operations in the region has penetrated further and deeper than many may have supposed. The assessment has been unprecedented. Over a 14-month period, the UNEP team examined more than 200 locations, surveyed 122 kilometres of pipeline rights of way, reviewed more than 5,000 medical records and engaged over 23,000 people at local community meetings.³³³

The devastating pollution in the Niger Delta has destroyed the atmosphere, soil fertility, waterways and mangroves, wildlife, plant life and aqua life. These environmental malpractices have resulted in acid rain, and shortage of food, in addition to human respiratory problems, partial deafness and other health hazards. These developments have repeatedly seen the indigenes taking the law into their own lands to seek redress through militancy and destruction of petroleum installations after the society failed them when they sought other means.

ii. Ogoniland

One of the areas worst hit in this region is Ogoniland. This is the ancestral home of the Ogoni people, an indigenous ethnic group in Rivers State, one of the Niger Delta states with a high concentration of petroleum which the federal government extracts. Its population is about 832,000 people and it covers about 1,000 sq. km southeast of the Niger Delta basin. Ogoniland has four local government areas: Eleme, Gokana, Khana, and Tai. Traditionally the area is formed by six kingdoms (Babbe, Eleme, Gokana, Ken-Khana, Nyo-Khana and Tai). Oil

³³² John Campbell, “Significant Rise of Insecurity in the Niger Delta Through 2019,” Council on Foreign Relations, February 26, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/significant-rise-insecurity-niger-delta-through-2019>.

³³³ United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), “Environmental Assessment of Ogoniland Report,” UNEP - UN Environment Programme, August 4, 2011, <https://www.unenvironment.org/explore-topics/disasters-conflicts/where-we-work/nigeria/environmental-assessment-ogoniland-report>.

exploration and the attendant social and environmental consequences commenced in Ogoniland before Nigeria's 1960 independence. Environmental incidents, including oil spills and uncontrolled gas flares from the drilling of oil and gas, went on unabated for decades with slow and inadequate responses from the government and multinational oil corporations who were feeding fat on the carcass of the region. Although Nigeria rose to the world stage because of petroleum, and this income source has built and sustained the country after its devastating civil war, the Ogoni people have suffered the worst impact from the oil industry.

The human and ecological atrocities going on with flagrant disregard for humanity and creation led to the establishment of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) under the leadership of an indigenous environmental activist and author, Ken Saro-Wiwa, in 1990. The non-violent movement advocated for social and ecological justice for the Ogoni people and the Niger Delta from the hands of the Nigerian government and the oil giants, Shell and Chevron whom they accused of waging an ecological war and genocidal attacks against them. Saro-Wiwa attracted international attention to the Ogoni cause as MOSOP continued to demand a share in oil revenues, ecological redress and greater political autonomy. Conflicts escalated in the region and were not peacefully resolved. The ensuing violence made oil exploration and production activities in Ogoniland cease in 1993. In 1995, Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni leaders were tried by a military tribunal and hanged. Thus did nine men – Baribor Bera, Saturday Dobee, Nordu Eawo, Daniel Gbokoo, Barinem Kiobel, John Kpuinen, Paul Levura, Felix Nuata and Ken Saro-Wiwa – pay the true price of oil, Nigeria's liquid gold. Although oil production has ceased in Ogoniland since 1993, the place can be compared to an abandoned ecological cemetery, as the environmental footprint and pollution which went on for decades are yet to be sufficiently

addressed. The Niger Delta region for the most part has remained an ecological limbo, praying for God to renew the face of the earth.

d. Flourishing of Life: Ecological Healing in the Niger Delta

Given the decades of ecological and human devastation of the Niger Delta due to oil exploration and a corrupt marriage of complicity between the government and the multinationals, the study evaluates practices that have the potential to ameliorate the situation as well as other developments hindering hoped-for resolutions.

i. Practices Proffering Solution

In the recent past, a lot of voices have been trying to make a difference. Some practical measures have also been instituted to halt the ecological pogrom that has gone on in full glee in the Niger Delta. One of such is the establishment of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) at the beginning of this millennium. Today, the NDDC is very visible in the Niger Delta. According to its mandate, the “NDDC was established in 2000 with the mission of facilitating the rapid, even and sustainable development of the Niger Delta into a region that is economically prosperous, socially stable, ecologically regenerative and politically peaceful.”³³⁴

In 2011, the UNEP made known its report cited above urging for the immediate clean-up of Ogoniland which may take up to 30 years to guarantee full environmental restoration, with calls for an initial US\$1 billion fund to kick-start the clean-up.³³⁵ This reflects the aspirations of the

³³⁴ Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), “About Us,” 2020, <https://www.nddc.gov.ng/about-us>.

³³⁵ United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), “Environmental Assessment of Ogoniland Report.”

United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)³³⁶ as well as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)³³⁷ which succeeded the MDGs.

Amidst all these, the most remarkable step to turn things around came in 2016 when “in fulfillment of his electioneering campaign promise to the Ogoni people, President Buhari, who was represented by the acting President, Yemi Osinbajo, launched the cleanup of Ogoniland on June 2, 2016, in Bodo, which had been wreck by over 30 years of oil spillage.”³³⁸ The UN Environment's Executive Director Achim Steiner joined Vice President Osinbajo for the launch ceremony. The federal government “set in motion a \$1 billion clean-up and restoration program of the Ogoniland region in the Niger Delta, announcing that financial and legislative frameworks had been put in place to begin implementing recommendations made by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).”³³⁹ Two years later, the federal government upped its ante by enacting the *Flare Gas (Prevention of Waste and Pollution) Regulations 2018* aimed at reducing the environmental impact caused by the flaring of methane/natural gas in Nigeria.³⁴⁰

Nonetheless, I think the most essential approach the government took as hostilities escalated in the Niger Delta region was the demilitarization of the region. The Niger Delta agitation had become bloody with the heavy proliferation of arms and war machinery among indigenous amphibious guerrilla groups scattered all over the creeks. The zone was a hotbed of violence, kidnappings of expatriate oil workers for huge ransoms, constant eviction threats to the oil

³³⁶ United Nations, “United Nations Millennium Development Goals” (United Nations), accessed May 5, 2020, <https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>.

³³⁷ United Nations, “#Envision2030: 17 Goals to Transform the World for Persons with Disabilities,” accessed May 4, 2020, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/envision2030.html>.

³³⁸ Ebiri, “Government Prevaricates as Ogoni Feeds on Poisoned Fishes, Drinks Contaminated Water.”

³³⁹ United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), “Nigeria Launches \$1 Billion Ogoniland Clean-up and Restoration Programme,” UN Environment, August 7, 2017, <http://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/nigeria-launches-1-billion-ogoniland-clean-and-restoration-programme>.

³⁴⁰ Federal Republic of Nigeria, “Flare Gas (Prevention of Waste and Pollution) Regulations 2018,” 2018, <https://ngfcp.dpr.gov.ng/media/1120/flare-gas-prevention-of-waste-and-pollution-regulations-2018-gazette-cleaner-copy-1.pdf>.

companies, vandalism of oil pipelines, private refining of crude oil by different armed groups, oil bunkering, bombings of oil installations and many deaths. The youths had taken up arms against the government and the oil firms devastating their homeland. The militants did a lot of harm to halt the government's major source of income in their land. They gave the military a run for their money and there were a lot of deaths both ways. Eventually, a ceasefire was brokered. The government granted total amnesty to the militants as they surrendered, and tried to reintegrate them into the society in different productive ways. It was not a one-stop process but it prevented further destruction and brought relative peace as well as a fair sense of stability and security to the area, as long as both parties kept their side of the bargain. The carrot-and-stick strategy employed in the amnesty program to quell the insurrection in the region has done a lot of good.

ii. Practices Preventing Positive Resolution

So far, it has been a mix of turbulence and respite. Even though the annihilation of the ecosystem in the Niger Delta has practically come to the table, it is not yet *El Dorado* socially and ecologically for the people of the Niger Delta. While measures have been touted to have been put in place, certain practices still prevent optimum resolution of the long devastation. The government and the oil companies have been fingered as not coming through with their promises. Pockets of youth restiveness in the area due to the breakdown of law and order have also been contributory to the relapse of some of the gains won already. The economy of the region is still in shambles. Loss of agricultural livelihood together with rising unemployment has left people in squalor. Rule of law and human rights have not been keenly protected and victims of environmental displacement are not being well compensated.

There is no gainsaying that the corruption endemic in the Nigerian system has created mistrust among the populace in the antics of the government which continues to exhibit a lack of empathy, transparency, accountability and consistent policy reforms. Breakdown of communication between relevant stakeholders and the grassroots does not augur well in sensitizing the masses. As the cultural heritage of the indigenous people is gradually eroded, the situation is further exacerbated by the absence of robust legislation and implementation of developmental policies. Poor funding of capital projects and development initiatives are among the plagues of the country because the proper funds have been diverted to waiting private pockets with no repercussions. Since the demise of the late Nigerian dictator, General Sani Abacha who died on seat in 1998, some of the looted funds expatriated are being returned from the countries they were domiciled,³⁴¹ and in spite of the billions being recovered, it is feared that the recovered loot has gone back into the re-looting cycle. Abacha has become like a dead uncle who often sends some money to his people on earth to keep them going. His wife allegedly boasted that no matter how poor she becomes, she cannot be as poor as Nigeria.

From reports on the ground too, the purported Ogoniland clean-up is suspected to be another will-o'-the-wisp announced just to score expensive political points. A recent news report cites the claims of Mr. Laolu Akande, Senior Special Assistant to the Vice President on Media and Publicity that “since the Ogoni Cleanup commenced in January 2019, with 16 contractors moving to site, a total of 21 sites has so far been handed over to contractors by Hydrocarbon Pollution Restoration Project (HYPREP) under the Federal Ministry of Environment.” In a counter, MOSOP alleges that “not much progress has been recorded on the project. We further note that the hype and claims of progress made on the Ogoni cleanup had only been on the pages

³⁴¹ Linda Ikeji, “FG Receives \$311m Abacha Loot from US and Bailiwick of Jersey,” Linda Ikeji’s Blog, May 4, 2020, <https://www.lindaikejisblog.com/2020/5/fg-receives-311m-abacha-loot-from-us-and-bailiwick-of-jersey.html>.

of newspapers and other media platforms and not visible in Ogoni.” The Movement suspects the “mismanagement of available funds and corruption” and calls “on the Federal Government to probe the ongoing clean-up activities in Ogoni land.”³⁴² Confirming the hide-and-seek going on in the publicized Ogoniland clean-up, the Guardian newspaper notes that:

Out of the initial funding of U.S. \$1 billion to implement the environmental cleanup within the next five years, only \$10 million has been released by Shell. The Federal Government, through the Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), which was supposed to contribute 55 percent of the funding is yet to contribute a dime. Sources disclosed to The Guardian that the environmental restoration exercise may be undermined by funding, greed, and political schemings.³⁴³

The silence of the world powers has also been heard loudly as these multinational corporations have become channels of industrial colonialism in third-world countries. A Forbes report avers that “oil and violence in the Niger Delta isn't talked about much, but it has a global impact.”³⁴⁴

Condemning the ignominious silence of the Western world, Vidal holds that:

Oil companies have acted with such impunity and recklessness that much of the region has been devastated by leaks. In fact, more oil is spilled from the delta's network of terminals, pipes, pumping stations and oil platforms every year than has been lost in the Gulf of Mexico, the site of a major ecological catastrophe caused by oil that has poured from a leak triggered by the explosion that wrecked BP's Deepwater Horizon rig last month. That disaster, which claimed the lives of 11 rig workers, has made headlines round the world. By contrast, little information has emerged about the damage inflicted on the Niger delta. Yet the destruction there provides us with a far more accurate picture of the price we have to pay for drilling oil today.³⁴⁵

³⁴² Fegalo Nsuke, “Why Buhari Must Probe Ogoni Cleanup - MOSOP - P.M. News,” January 28, 2020, <https://www.pmnewsnigeria.com/2020/01/28/why-buhari-must-probe-ogoni-cleanup-mosop/>.

³⁴³ Ebiri, “Government Prevaricates as Ogoni Feeds on Poisoned Fishes, Drinks Contaminated Water.”

³⁴⁴ University of Houston Energy Fellows, “Oil And Violence In The Niger Delta Isn't Talked About Much, But It Has A Global Impact,” Forbes, February 13, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/uhenergy/2017/02/13/oil-and-violence-in-the-niger-delta-isnt-talked-about-much-but-it-has-a-global-impact/>.

³⁴⁵ John Vidal, “Nigeria's Agony Dwarfs the Gulf Oil Spill. The US and Europe Ignore It,” *The Observer*, May 29, 2010, sec. Environment, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/may/30/oil-spills-nigeria-niger-delta-shell>.

CNN directly fingers “Shell and Eni, the two major operators in the Niger Delta, of negligence in their response to oil spills in the area.”³⁴⁶ Edward Obi in his study of the ecological state of the Niger Delta juxtaposes the market mentality of the corporate bodies involved in this long-term destruction and the delivery of social justice in the region. With empirical precision, he reveals that the continuous, massive and unmitigated pollution in the Nigeria Delta as well as “the attendant losses to livelihoods and ecosystem relief could have either been prevented or ameliorated, if Shell’s managers had made more appropriate and timely investments to enable them to be more proactive and precautionary, in line with international standards.”³⁴⁷ This comes on the heels of a far-reaching investigative report by Amnesty International exposing the truancy of the oil giants:

Shell and Eni claim they are doing everything they can to prevent oil spills but... the companies often ignore reports for months on end. The Niger Delta is one of the most polluted places on earth and it beggars belief that the companies responsible are still displaying this level of negligence. Adding insult to injury is the fact that Shell and Eni seem to be publishing unreliable information about the cause and extent of spills. The people of the Niger Delta have paid the price for Shell and Eni’s recklessness for too long. Thanks to Decoders, we’re a step closer to bringing them to account. Amnesty International is now asking the Nigerian government to re-open investigations into 89 oil spills.³⁴⁸

So far, the sociopolitical structure of Nigeria has not yielded the best possible results in remedying the widespread destruction of the Niger Delta perpetuated by unethical interest groups. Hence this paper further pursues a contextualized theological framework of redress for the Niger Delta, to restore the dignity of creation and the flourishing of life in Nigeria.

³⁴⁶ Bukola Adebayo, “Major New Inquiry into Oil Spills in Nigeria’s Niger Delta Launched,” CNN, March 26, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/03/26/africa/nigeria-oil-spill-inquiry-intl/index.html>.

³⁴⁷ Edward Osang Obi, “Mining and Resource Extraction in Nigeria: Social Justice and Corporate Responsibility,” in *Ecology and Theology of Nature*, ed. Linda Hogan, João Vila-Chã, and Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, Concilium (Glen Rock, N.J.) 2018 (London: SCM Press, 2018), 114.

³⁴⁸ Amnesty International, “Nigeria: Amnesty Activists Uncover Serious Negligence by Oil Giants Shell and Eni,” March 16, 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/03/nigeria-amnesty-activists-uncover-serious-negligence-by-oil-giants-shell-and-eni/>.

e. An Ecotheology for the Niger Delta

As shown throughout this work, ecotheology is a branch of constructive theology that focuses on the relationship between doctrine and nature, between religion and creation, between the divine and the ecosystem. It is simply a constructive marriage between ecology and theology. It seeks to interpret the doctrine of creation and sustainability of the universe in the light of contemporary environmental concerns. It is thus an interdisciplinary and practical theology that dwells heavily on biblical imagination seeking ecological transformation and the flourishing of creation. Its goal is to seek an end to the ecological crises bedeviling us. I love to picture it as the “greening of religion,” in Bron Taylor’s words.³⁴⁹ In their paper on preaching the “green gospel” in the Nigerian context, Manus and Obioma assert that: “A major objective of the paper is to recommend the need for faith people in Africa to begin to get involved in ecological concerns on the African continent and especially in Nigeria with its huge oil and gas industries.”³⁵⁰ This section, therefore, reflects on the intrinsic goodness of God’s creation and consequently urges for ecological conversion in our dealings with creation.

i. The Goodness of God’s Creation

The creation story of Genesis 1:24–31 climaxes with the expression of God’s joy at the culmination of his creative work. This satisfaction is articulated as the vision of the intrinsic goodness of his handiwork. Even after the flood devastation, God makes a covenant not only with Noah but with the whole earth in Genesis 9: 9-10: “I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you.” This affirms the divine establishment

³⁴⁹ Taylor, “The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part One),” 296.

³⁵⁰ Manus and Obioma, “Preaching the ‘Green Gospel’ in Our Environment,” 2.

of a harmonious relational co-existence between human beings created in the *imago Dei* irrespective of gender or classifications, as well as between humankind and animals and nature.³⁵¹ This is the fundamental basis for engendering a right relationship in a Nigerian creation theology.³⁵² Creation groans today because of the culture of exploitation rather than a culture of responsibility.

Responsibility for creation is a core component of the Catholic Social teachings (CST). Nature embodies the sacramentality of God's creative presence on earth. St Augustine, eminent African theologian of creation and Father of the Church, emphasizes the goodness of God's creation as Genesis 1:4 holds indicating God's approval of his own work.³⁵³ This superlative goodness is considered as the totality of the universe, beyond individual good things.³⁵⁴ In calling us to ecological awareness, Augustine in his sublime practice of biblical imagination, avers that the *imago Dei* in human beings confers on us the power of reason and dominion in the sense of watchfulness over humanity itself and the rest of creation, like the good and faithful steward of the gospel placed over the household till the owner returns. Dominion is translated as temperance and modesty over the beast in us.³⁵⁵ He views man's privileged position in creation as a vocation of service for "man was placed in paradise so as to work and guard it,"³⁵⁶ as our original vocation in creation. Man was made *imago trinitatis*.³⁵⁷ For Augustine, creation is both

³⁵¹ Michael J. Himes and Kenneth R. Himes, "The Sacrament of Creation: Toward an Environmental Theology," in *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology*, ed. Mary Heather MacKinnon and Moni McIntyre (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1995), 270.

³⁵² Lucas F. Johnston, *Religion and Sustainability: Social Movements and the Politics of the Environment* (Sheffield ; Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2013), 118.

³⁵³ Augustine, "On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis, an Unfinished Book," 158 (5.22); Augustine, "On Genesis against the Manichees," 61 (1.8.13).

³⁵⁴ Augustine, *The Confessions*, 336 (XIII.28.43); Augustine, "On Genesis against the Manichees," 80 (1.21.32).

³⁵⁵ Augustine, "On Genesis against the Manichees," 78–79 (1.20.31).

³⁵⁶ Augustine, 111 (2.11.15).

³⁵⁷ Augustine, *The Trinity*, 390 (XIV.5.25).

Trinitarian in origin and trinitarian in act, as nature proclaims its founder, the Trinity.³⁵⁸ From Augustine's theology of the Trinitarian founding of creation, we are invited into the community which God is. Creation then becomes our community. Moreover, this present COVID-19 pandemic has so exposed the interrelatedness and interdependence both of humankind and of the entire creation.

ii. Ecological Conversion

The controversial article by Lynn Townsend White Jr., in 1967 birthed a furious debate that gave rise to contemporary eco-theology. Titled *The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis*, White investigates "man's unnatural treatment of nature and its sad results."³⁵⁹ On the basis of the Genesis creation story, White holds that the Judeo-Christian religious tradition gave impetus to Western science and technology to subdue nature to man's advantage. This crass exploitation of nature to serve man's sole use is the root of the current ecological crises. Nonetheless, "since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not."³⁶⁰ White singles out St Francis of Assisi as a model in eco-theology as he concludes: "I propose Francis as a patron saint for ecologists."³⁶¹

In 1979, Pope John Paul II who had assumed the Papacy in 1978 issued a Papal Bull declaring St Francis of Assisi the patron of ecology.³⁶² The Pontiff reflects on the disorder in "the relationship between human activity and the whole of creation,"³⁶³ emphasizing the current ecological crisis as a moral problem. In search of a solution, he recognizes the ecological vocation as a common

³⁵⁸ Augustine, 399 (XV.2.6); 402 (XV.2.10); 426 (XV.5.39).

³⁵⁹ White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," 1203.

³⁶⁰ White, 1207.

³⁶¹ White, 1207.

³⁶² John Paul II, "Papal Declaration of Francis as Patron of Ecology."

³⁶³ John Paul II, *The Ecological Crisis*, §5.

responsibility and stresses the urgent need for a new solidarity as well as “a courageous reform of structures.”³⁶⁴

When Jorge Mario Bergoglio was elected Pope in 2013, he took Francis as his papal name published an encyclical with the title *Laudato Si'* on care for our common home, a title taken from St Francis of Assisi's *Canticle of the Sun* (also known as the *Canticle of the Creatures*). Pope Francis addresses White's concerns by retreating to Augustine's Trinitarian theology of creation. Francis here teaches that “the divine Persons are subsistent relations, and the world, created according to the divine model, is a web of relationships.”³⁶⁵ What I find most profound in the encyclical, however, is the inward ecological conversion that Francis advocates for, giving ecology a human face in spite of all. The holy pastor exhorts: “Concern for the environment thus needs to be joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society.”³⁶⁶ Above all, he explains the true situation of the scriptures with regard to our contemporary ecological crises. From his reflection,

Inadequate presentation of Christian anthropology gave rise to a wrong understanding of the relationship between human beings and the world. Often, what was handed on was a Promethean vision of mastery over the world, which gave the impression that the protection of nature was something that only the faint-hearted cared about. Instead, our “dominion” over the universe should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship.³⁶⁷

Finally, Denis Edwards exhorts us towards a planetary spirituality.³⁶⁸ This stems from the conviction that “all of creation is good,” with their origin in the divine Trinity of love. As such, the biblical doctrine of dominion “is not to be construed as a license for the abuse of nature.

³⁶⁴ John Paul II, §11.

³⁶⁵ Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §240.

³⁶⁶ Francis, §91.

³⁶⁷ Francis, §116.

³⁶⁸ Denis Edwards, *Partaking of God: Trinity, Evolution, and Ecology* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2014), 152.

Human beings are made in the divine image and are to behave as God would behave.”³⁶⁹ This is the conversion that will see to ecological and human flourishing by protecting creation and promoting love and justice for humankind and otherkind.

³⁶⁹ Denis Edwards, *The God of Evolution: A Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 9–10.

4. Chapter Four: Fulfillment of Creation: An Eschatological Reading

We may identify two fundamental issues in discussing the theology of creation. The first is the origin of creation which we have discussed hitherto. The second stop in the discourse is the end or destiny of creation. We may understand this as the question about the future of creation or the eschatology of creation. Some scholars may view this also under the themes of redemption and soteriology of creation. Be that as it may, not a few scholars have sought a more promising fundamental path to creation theology through the eschatology detour, emphasizing the importance of creation order and eschatological hope in forging a Christian ethical solution to our current ecological challenges.³⁷⁰ Lynn White had also suggested similar lines of ecological action in keeping to the fundamentals. He mused: “What shall we do? No one yet knows. Unless we think about fundamentals, our specific measures may produce new backlashes more serious than those they are designed to remedy.”³⁷¹ In response to White, therefore, there has been a notable shift from cosmology to soteriology as the rationale for earthkeeping.³⁷² Corroborating this turn to the eschatological interpretation of ecology, Steven Bouma-Prediger posits the central thesis in his work that “eschatology shapes ethics.”³⁷³ He agrees with James Nash that eschatology is one of the ecological complaints against Christianity because of its escapist outlook.³⁷⁴ The Christian religion has repeatedly been faulted on ecological grounds for its

³⁷⁰ Wit, “Christ-Centred Ethical Behaviour and Ecological Crisis,” 1.

³⁷¹ White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” 1204.

³⁷² Wit, “Christ-Centred Ethical Behaviour and Ecological Crisis,” 4; Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology*, *Ecologies of Grace* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 14–15, <https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195328516.001.0001/acprof-9780195328516>; Ernst Conradie, “Book Review: *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology*,” *Theology* 113, no. 872 (March 1, 2010): 153–54, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571X1011300229>.

³⁷³ Steven Bouma-Prediger, “Eschatology Shapes Ethics: New Creation and Christian Ecological Virtue Ethics” 2, no. 2 (2013): 17.

³⁷⁴ Bouma-Prediger, 18; James A. Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility*, Publications of the Churches’ Center for Theology and Public Policy (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1991).

inadequate eschatology,³⁷⁵ and this has become one of the pertinent reasons why religion is also employed in seeking ecological redress because even this escapist eschatology which features a lofty soteriology can become a portent motivation for a sublime ecological disposition. This is the position of Manus and Obioma who hold that: “Humankind’s interpretation of the Christian conception of eschatology in which heaven is a promise for and hope of the good-willed and perfect faithful ought to dispose of many secularist, materialist thinkers and capitalists who still cling dedicatedly to profiting from the earth’s resources and its exploitation here and now for the living.”³⁷⁶ Indeed, “it is in the relationship of humans with the rest of nature, the nature even within us, that the eschatological query becomes equally so imminent and so hidden.”³⁷⁷ Thus, this chapter examines contemporary developments in both Christian eschatology and African eschatology, embracing their insightful contributions to an effective creation theology.

a. Creation and Eschatology

Robert Miller urges our knowledge of creation to inform our eschatology. He insists on the imperative of imbibing a creation-science-informed eschatology. For him, the reason for creation is the Incarnation, which is the self-communication of God, and he tries to draw the connection to eschatology in his central question. He asks: “How can we bring together systematically (albeit somewhat schematically) the doctrines of creation, incarnation, eschatology, and providence in order to begin to address these factors that inhibit our imagining and taking

³⁷⁵ Wit, “Christ-Centred Ethical Behaviour and Ecological Crisis,” 1; Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care*, 2nd ed., Engaging Culture (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2010).

³⁷⁶ Manus and Obioma, “Preaching the ‘Green Gospel’ in Our Environment,” 5.

³⁷⁷ Vitor Westhelle, *Eschatology and Space: The Lost Dimension in Theology Past and Present*, 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 110, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bostoncollege-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1058225>.

responsibility for our actions whose effects will extend into the deep future?”³⁷⁸ George E. Tinker offers more insight into this connection with his claim that:

Creation is not just God’s initiatory (temporally primordial) act; it is an ongoing eschatological act (with spatial particularity). Thus, even an Indian Christian hermeneutic must press toward seeing creation as the eschatological basis even for the Christ event. If this seems difficult to grasp, indeed, it is likely so because the western cultures in which the gospel has traditionally come to find its home are so fundamentally oriented toward temporality and disoriented from any foundational sense of spatiality.³⁷⁹

This subsection thus seeks to establish a synthesis between the theology of the beginnings and the theology of the end, linking these two polar events with the redemption brought about by Christ’s Incarnation, and extending the same to all of creation.

i. History: Threading Creation and Redemption

The single link between the beginning of creation and the end of creation is the history of salvation, which is the long stretch of creaturely history. Is this stretch eternal? Does it rather have a temporal tag? Eminent Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad commends this link and traces it back to Israel in the Ancient Near East, arguing that “theologically it was a great achievement that Israel was actually able to make a connection between Creation and the saving history.”³⁸⁰ Does eschatology then have a place in this link? This discourse is obviously as elusive as it is problematic, for as Protagoras would say, “the factors preventing knowledge are many; the obscurity of the subject and the brevity of human life.”³⁸¹

³⁷⁸ Richard W. Miller, “Deep Responsibility for the Deep Future,” *Theological Studies* 77, no. 2 (June 2016): 445, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563916636488>.

³⁷⁹ George E. Tinker, *Spirit and Resistance: Political Theology and American Indian Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 91.

³⁸⁰ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology.*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, Harper, 1962), 136.

³⁸¹ Samuel Enoch Stumpf, *Philosophy: History & Problems*, 5th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 32, <http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/toc/mh022/93037860.html>.

ii. Christian Dualism: The Seeds of Platonism

Christian eschatology is generally dualistic: body and soul; natural and supernatural; physical and spiritual; humanity and nature; *imago Dei* and the rest of creation. This is one of the major ecological charges against Christianity. As Lynn White puts it, “Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia’s religions (except, perhaps, Zoroastrianism), not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.”³⁸² However, White was not the first to lay this accusation about the otherworldliness of Christian eschatology. Before him, Feuerbach had also reported that “nature, the world, has no value, no interest for Christians. The Christian thinks only of himself and the salvation of his soul.”³⁸³ For these scholars, Christianity has no value for creation but only for the salvation of the soul, courtesy of Christian dualism which may also be traced to the influence of Platonism³⁸⁴ on Christian eschatology. This has tainted Western outlook with a deep man/nature dualism, resulting in a dualistic eschatology in which is found no cause to care for the earth. As Martinus de Wit sums up,

White argued that the biblical view of humans made in the image of God and given dominion over the earth introduced a dualism between humans and nature and a licence for exploitation. A further critique against Christianity is focused on ‘perceived inadequacies of Christian eschatology’ (Bouma-Prediger 2001:71), accusing Christianity of otherworldliness and little rationale for creation care.³⁸⁵

Be that as it may, some others have posited that an ecologically friendly eschatology can be found in the Christian tradition. Steven Bouma-Prediger is convinced similarly, and avers after thorough research that “the Bible teaches not an escapist but an earth-affirming eschatology.”³⁸⁶

³⁸² White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” 1205.

³⁸³ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 287.

³⁸⁴ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. George Maximilian Anthony Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett PubCo, 1974).

³⁸⁵ Wit, “Christ-Centred Ethical Behaviour and Ecological Crisis,” 1–2.

³⁸⁶ Bouma-Prediger, “Eschatology Shapes Ethics: New Creation and Christian Ecological Virtue Ethics,” 21.

We shall subsequently investigate if such claims still have merit in the light of contemporary scholarship.

iii. Ecotheology and Eschatology: Doctrinally Reconcilable?

The central question here is whether Christian doctrine has room for a systematic theology that offers a coherent and comprehensive ecological eschatology. Elizabeth Johnson would refer to this at different points as “eco-soteriology”, “redemption of non-humans”, “customized redemption of all things.”³⁸⁷ Most scholars also identify the cosmic redemption in Romans 8:21-23 as Paul’s ecotheological eschatology. Reflecting on the protological and eschatological, therefore, Johnson contends that the “earthly end is not ultimately final.”³⁸⁸ She stands out in her formulation of the internal coherence of creation and eschatology.³⁸⁹

Miller again draws the connection between the doctrines of creation, Christology and eschatology. He finds in the Incarnation, the link between creation and eschatology. In his quest for the theological foundations of an ethics for the deep future, he posits that the doctrines of creation, Christology and eschatology make up such theological foundations.³⁹⁰ Only a valid doctrinal reconciliation between ecotheology and eschatology can promote an integral and systematic earth-saving theology. This attempt we see more in the last few centuries.

b. Eschatological Shifts of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

From the foregoing, one thing that has stood out is that the markers in the eschatology terrain have seen some changes in the last few centuries. While eschatology continues to receive

³⁸⁷ Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 226–31.

³⁸⁸ Johnson, 219.

³⁸⁹ Johnson, 213.

³⁹⁰ Miller, “Deep Responsibility for the Deep Future,” 436.

invigorated interest in recent times, we also note some new trends in the field. There seems to have been a revision of its concerns, if not a redefinition of eschatology. Whereas traditional eschatology tilted more towards the temporal (end times, last things), scholars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have radically expanded the horizons of eschatology to the spatial (social integration, ecology). The separation of time from space has indeed been lauded as the landmark of the present epoch.³⁹¹ As Westhelle rightly notes, “reflections about spatial issues (land, borders, migration, displacement, marginalization, rationalities, etc.) are topics that bring the eschatological question to the forefront in a different perspective.”³⁹² He explains further:

Eschatological discourse and the practices it elicits and reflects upon have been ensnared by a **paradigm dominant** in the Christian West since at least the time of Augustine. Such paradigm is determined by the prevalence of **time and history** to the exclusion of concerns with **space and geography**. Change, progress, and praxis operate as functions of a **linear conception of time**. If eschatology is the thinking, teaching, and theorizing about *ta eschata*, the last things, it is assumed that it has to do with some sort of an end of time, as a date to be speculated about in a near or distant future, something that has already taken place in the past, or it is time suspended in an existential now. Any combination of these options abound as well, as for instance in the celebrated formula “**already-and-not-yet**.” But in any case, it is about abstract time, time that can be conceived and discussed apart and independent from the **contexts** that envelop it.³⁹³

In addition to this, Westhelle then asks:

The following questions might be proposed to offer the basic option of issues to be further examined: Is the severance between nature/space/fact, on one hand, and history/time/meaning, on the other, proper to the core of the Christian story? Or else, could this severance be conceived as a hermeneutic device that, even if prevalent in Western Christianity, has its own relative genealogy and must not be taken as ultimately normative for the reconstruction of Christian theology? If the former would receive an affirmative answer, we should put to rest all the efforts of searching for approaches to soteriology and eschatology that would take the trial of space into consideration; a somber thesis that can be proven wrong. But if

³⁹¹ Westhelle, *Eschatology and Space*, 11.

³⁹² Westhelle, xv.

³⁹³ Westhelle, 1.

the latter is the case, how are we to proceed to present the Christian story so as not to render God's epiphany placeless?³⁹⁴

Having seen all these, there is no gainsaying that eschatology as a branch of systematic theology has been rejigged over the last centuries. Exploring this reorientation is pivotal to establishing the place of ecology in a valid, coherent and comprehensive eschatology.

i. What Eschatology Is Not

According to Moltmann, “eschatology was long called the ‘doctrine of the last things’ or the ‘doctrine of the end’. By these last things were meant events which will one day break upon man, history and the world at the end of time.”³⁹⁵ Fletcher also notes that “as the doctrine of the ‘last things’ (Greek *eschata*), eschatology is the area of belief that speaks of the final destiny of humankind and the world, and articulates a vision of the ultimate aim toward which creation tends.”³⁹⁶ Confining eschatology to the *logos* of the last things has been contentious. Moltmann is convinced that “the term ‘eschato-logy’ is wrong. There can be no ‘doctrine’ of the last things if by ‘doctrine’ we mean a collection of theses which can be understood on the basis of experiences that constantly recur and are open to anyone.”³⁹⁷ He challenges this end-time narrowing of eschatology, saying that there is only one problem in eschatology – the problem of the future. “How can anyone speak of the future, which is not yet here, and of coming events in which he has not as yet had any part?”³⁹⁸ Talking about this realm of the unknown, the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith concurs that “neither Scripture nor theology provides

³⁹⁴ Westhelle, 14–15.

³⁹⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, [1st U.S. ed.]. (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 15.

³⁹⁶ Jeannine Hill Fletcher, “Eschatology,” in *Systematic Theology*, ed. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin, 2nd ed., Roman Catholic Perspectives (Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, 2011), 622, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt22nm83q.22>.

³⁹⁷ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 17.

³⁹⁸ Moltmann, 16.

sufficient light for a proper picture of life after death.”³⁹⁹ We cannot claim to have a *logos* of the future “unless the future is the continuation or regular occurrence of the present.”⁴⁰⁰

In the same vein, eschatology has been expounded against the backdrop of cosmology, soteriology as well as apocalyptic. They overlap, but they are not the same. Cosmology deals with the scientific study of the universe, taking into cognizance its origin, evolution as well as ultimate fate. Soteriology is the theological study of the doctrine of salvation as held in a given religion. The apocalyptic is the religious belief in an imminent, dramatic and tumultuous end of the world as a revealed phenomenon. The apocalyptic has been in vogue for long such that the “eschatological discourse has been equated with a form of the end of time.”⁴⁰¹ The apocalyptic tends towards annihilation of creation and has been fingered as contributing to the Christian disregard for the physical world, although Theodore McCall has cautioned that “not all forms of apocalyptic are anti-ecological.”⁴⁰² Hence, Moltmann differentiates between apocalypticism and apocalyptic eschatology, the former holding a destructive cataclysmic end of the universe.⁴⁰³ This review shows that traditional eschatology was rather bleak, anthropocentric and held no promise for creation. However, current eschatological engagements now seek to really understand the future of creation and not only humanity.

³⁹⁹ Congregatio pro Doctrina Fidei, *Letter on Certain Questions Concerning Eschatology* (Vatican City: Vatican Polyglot Press, 1979), 3.

⁴⁰⁰ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 17.

⁴⁰¹ Westhelle, *Eschatology and Space*, xiii.

⁴⁰² Theodore David McCall, *The Greenie's Guide to the End of the World: Ecology and Eschatology* (Hindmarsh, S.Aust: ATF Press, 2011), 28.

⁴⁰³ McCall, 27.

ii. Contemporary Retrieval of Eschatology

Eschatology has long been condemned to the discourse of the end of the ages. However, the relegation of eschatology to theology's time travel was not the case until after Aquinas. Fletcher traces this downwards development thus:

For Aquinas, eschatology is not merely a concern with the end-time, but the very purpose of creation toward its telos infuses all created reality from beginning to end. As Aquinas and the various strands of the tradition were transformed into the manuals of theology in the eighteenth century, the approach seems to have lost sight of the whole of theology as eschatological. Eschatology became focused merely on the "last things" beyond the world.⁴⁰⁴

That being the case, theology now attempts a deconstruction and reconstruction of eschatology from its marginalized state. Peter Phan chronicles this new theological furor of the 20th century thus: "Eschatology, the theological treatise investigating the Last Things, has had quite a checkered career. After a long period of benign neglect it made at the turn of this century a dramatic comeback onto the theological scene."⁴⁰⁵ He gives Karl Rahner credit for this reinvigorated eschatological comeback.⁴⁰⁶ I call this the contemporary retrieval of eschatology. Metz captures the drama succinctly, that "although theology has a tract on eschatology, it generally puts this eschatology in a corner well away from the center of theology in the treatise 'on the last things.'"⁴⁰⁷ He, therefore, insists that "Christian eschatology must come out of this corner, into which it was shoved by a theology which has forgotten the relevance of hope and of the future."⁴⁰⁸ From this, Moltmann gives a new definition of eschatology:

⁴⁰⁴ Fletcher, "Eschatology," 629.

⁴⁰⁵ Peter C. Phan, *Eternity in Time: A Study of Karl Rahner's Eschatology* (Selinsgrove [Pa.]: Susquehanna University Press, 1988), 9.

⁴⁰⁶ Phan, 9.

⁴⁰⁷ Metz, *Theology of the World*, 90.

⁴⁰⁸ Metz, 90.

In actual fact, however, eschatology means the doctrine of the Christian hope, which embraces both the object hoped for and also the hope inspired by it.... Hence eschatology cannot really be only a part a Christian doctrine. Rather, the eschatological outlook is characteristic of all Christian proclamation, of every Christian existence and of the whole Church.⁴⁰⁹

Lending his voice to the debate on the relationship between eschatology and theology, John Fuellenbach instructs that “eschatology is a keyword for theology, and the eschatological character of the Kingdom message must be the real point of departure,”⁴¹⁰ although he notes the problematic in this view of eschatology as the Kingdom of God, remarking that “Jesus never defined the Kingdom of God.”⁴¹¹

Karl Rahner links eschatology to anthropology and Christology and insists that the plurality of the human reality and its fulfillment must be maintained “in our eschatological statements about man, about the immortality of the soul, about the resurrection of the flesh, about an interval, and about the relationship between individual eschatology and universal, collective eschatology.”⁴¹² Also, he takes the scripture as the starting point of eschatological hermeneutics. For him, eschatology is prophetic but not revelatory, in spite of God’s omniscience;⁴¹³ it is about the open, free, unforeseeable future and has the character of hiddenness and mystery, as different from the apocalyptic which seeks to present a direct, crude and certain account of the future consummation, judgment. Eschatology is Christological and moves from present to future (apocalyptic moves from future to present), and this is its *terminus a quo* and its basic hermeneutic and practical principle. As he puts it, “to extrapolate from the present into the future

⁴⁰⁹ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 16.

⁴¹⁰ John Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God: The Message of Jesus Today* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1995), 83.

⁴¹¹ Fuellenbach, 155.

⁴¹² Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 443.

⁴¹³ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations, Vol. IV: More Recent Writings*, trans. Kevin Smyth, Rahner, Karl, 1904-1984. *Schriften Zur Theologie*. English ; v. 4 (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), 326.

is eschatology, to interpolate from the future into the present is apocalyptic.”⁴¹⁴ Very importantly, he sees eschatology as concerned with the fulfillment of “the *whole* man.” Man is a totality of body and soul; salvation is not of one dimension only but all dimensions of man. “Eschatology is concerned with the fulfillment of the individual as individual spirit-person which comes with death as the end of the individual history. Eschatology is also concerned with the fulfillment of humanity in the resurrection of the flesh as the end of the bodily history of the world.”⁴¹⁵ Hence, there is individual and collective eschatology. Particularly interested in eschatology as personal fulfillment, Rahner offers the hermeneutics of eschatological assertions. In his *Thesis 4*, he maintains that “all that can really be said about this future is that it can and must be the fulfillment of the whole man by the incomprehensible God, in the salvation hidden in Christ which is already given us.” Concluding his thesis, he says that “that fulfillment is the perfection of the salvation already assigned and granted by God in faith to man and humanity in Jesus Christ.”⁴¹⁶

The eschatological debate also extends to the scriptural exegesis on the interpretation of eschatology and the nowness or not-yetness of the Kingdom as well as what the *Parousia* holds for creation. Whereas Albert Schweitzer’s ‘consistent eschatology’ (*konsequente Eschatologie*) assigns it to the near future, and C. H. Dodd places it in the present time in the form of a ‘realized eschatology,’ Johannes Weiss is more skeptical, saying that “we have no direct utterances from Jesus on this.... But we may infer indirectly that at some earlier period of his ministry Jesus believed the coming of the Kingdom closer than turned out later to be the case.”⁴¹⁷

⁴¹⁴ Rahner, 337.

⁴¹⁵ Rahner, 341.

⁴¹⁶ Rahner, 333.

⁴¹⁷ Johannes Weiss, *Jesus’ Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*, Lives of Jesus Series (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 85.

For Schweitzer, “the main characteristic of Jesus is that he looks beyond the consummation and salvation of the individual to a consummation and salvation of the world and to an elect mankind.”⁴¹⁸ However, Dodd maintains that “the sayings which declare the Kingdom of God to have come are explicit and unequivocal. They are moreover the most characteristic and distinctive of the Gospel sayings on the subject.... If therefore we are seeking the *differentia* of the teaching of Jesus upon the Kingdom of God, it is here that it must be found.”⁴¹⁹ For Moltmann, the Kingdom of God is already realized in the present through a new creation having cosmic dimensions consequent upon Christ’s resurrection.⁴²⁰ In his rather caustic work titled *Les Dangers de L’Eschatologie*, Jean Carmignac berates the term ‘Eschatology’ as the reason for these controversies, urging its banishment in preference for the original and more precise notions of the Kingdom and the Kingdom of God. Carmignac emphasizes that the βασιλεία τοῦ Θεοῦ was already inaugurated by the historical Christ.⁴²¹

Nonetheless, I like how Ratzinger reconciles the theological tension between realized and thorough-going eschatologies, all founded on the same scriptures. He supports the maxim that “the greater the stress on imminent end, the older a text must be. The more mitigated such eschatological expectation appears, the more recent the text,” as the waiting Church tries to explain the delay of the coming.⁴²² Thus, Ratzinger reasons that the realized, presential eschatology, that is, the expectation of imminent end in the scriptures, is a feature of the older texts (eg. Mark). On the other hand, the projection of a thorough-going, consistent eschatology,

⁴¹⁸ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, ed. John Stephen Bowden, 1st complete ed (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 480.

⁴¹⁹ C. H Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, [Rev. ed.]. (New York: Scribner, 1961), 34.

⁴²⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life*, 1st Fortress Press ed.. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 122.

⁴²¹ Jean Carmignac, “Les Dangers de L’Eschatologie,” *New Testament studies* 17, no. 4 (1971): 386, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688500024103>.

⁴²² Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology, Death and Eternal Life*, ed. Aidan Nichols, trans. Michael Waldstein, Dogmatic Theology 9 (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 35.

which is a more mitigated expectation, would be characteristic of the newer texts (eg. Matthew, Luke), reflecting how the waiting early Church retrojected its own experience of the “delay” of the *Parousia* into the earlier sayings of Jesus. For him, ultimately, “Jesus *is* that Kingdom since through him the Spirit of God acts in the world.”⁴²³ Quite instructively, he notes that “the motif of the Kingdom is transformed into christology, because it is from Christ that the Spirit, the reign of God comes.”⁴²⁴

All these arguments and counter-arguments concerning eschatology show that eschatology, like ecotheology, is still a developing body of knowledge and the dialectics is still very open and livid.

c. John Mbiti: Delineating an African Eschatology

The aim of this section is to interrogate African eschatology in search of insights that promote an integral ecology, and more especially an African ecotheology. But can there even be an authentic African eschatology? If eschatology is all about the *eschata* as the last things, then no, we cannot lay claim to an African eschatology because in Africa, there are no last things. Life and death are one continuous cycle. The dead live on both in another world and in the memories left behind in this present world. However, if eschatology is about the future, there you have an African eschatology. An authentic African eschatology would therefore be a realized eschatology, a collective eschatology, an eschatology of hope. Above all, the hallmark of African eschatology is that it is an eschatology of fulfillment. Personal fulfillment in African eschatology starts from the present into the future. This fulfillment is not limited by death. This fulfillment has no end. It is also the fulfillment of all created reality.

⁴²³ Ratzinger, 35.

⁴²⁴ Ratzinger, 35.

i. Components of African Eschatology

John Samuel Mbiti has been in the frontlines of African theology and African eschatology. In his groundbreaking work on African eschatology, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background*, he establishes the relationship between Christian eschatology and African eschatology, asserting that: “Eschatology seems to be one of the items presenting us with the largest area of encounter between Christianity and African religiosity, but obviously with similarities and differences.”⁴²⁵ Hence, having presented an overview of Christian eschatology above, we shall now investigate the similarities and differences with African eschatology. This study is necessary because of long-held misconceptions about African religion and culture, and even about African human dignity. This situation which Ngolade presents in his research holds true for African Eschatology:

The first recorded facts about African Religions and culture were done by European explorers, travellers, missionaries, merchants and anthropologists who were either, the companions or pathfinders to the colonial administrators. Their accounts were biased by their primary motives for their adventure in the African soil. However, their works formed the first shot in the research on African Traditional Religion.⁴²⁶

African eschatology is the sum aggregate of the African *Weltanschauung* which comprises the philosophico-religious cosmology of Africans. Although the interactions with the West through the periods of the slave trade, colonialism, evangelization and modern globalization have diluted some aspects of the African culture and sensibilities, some key features of the African way of life still stand out. African eschatology likewise has not been left out in this tension between change and continuity. We shall explore this reality from different aspects and steer the discussion back

⁴²⁵ John S. Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background: A Study of the Encounter between New Testament Theology and African Traditional Concepts*, (London ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 3.

⁴²⁶ Donatus Nnabueze Ngolade, “John Samuel Mbiti and the Study of African Traditional Religion” (M.A., Nsukka, Nigeria, University of Nigeria, 1990), vii.

to Christian eschatology. This comparative study is aimed at fostering an appreciation of African eschatology. The author focuses his exposition on the Igbos of South-Eastern Nigeria where he comes from but also generously draws from the inputs of other Africans and non-Africans who have contributed to this subject.

1. Fulfillment

The main thrust of this section is that African eschatology is an eschatology of fulfillment. African eschatology is concerned with the fulfillment of the whole person; a composite of body and spirit. Personal fulfillment in African eschatology starts from the present into the future. This fulfillment is not limited by death. This fulfillment has no end. The hope of the African is to live in peace, see their children's children, leave a good name and perhaps wealth, and ultimately have people to remember them when they are gone, both in offspring and in memories. This is the summary of the African sense of fulfillment. Death is not annihilation, but a step in that process. Laurenti Magesa supports this view in his work where he describes this African notion of fulfillment as *Ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* in Zulu (South Africa) means "full or perfect humanity" and it is often translated as "ultimate or accomplished humanness," in the sense of humanity towards others.⁴²⁷ It has an undertone of 'I am because we are.' It is about the individual in relation to the whole as both tend towards fulfilment.⁴²⁸ Personal fulfillment here is not an isolated fulfillment but integral to the fulfillment of the aggregate whole, fulfillment of all fellow creatures.

Basic to this eschatological idea of fulfillment is the African conception of personhood which Nyamity vividly captures:

⁴²⁷ Laurenti Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred?: African Spirituality* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2013), 12–13.

⁴²⁸ Magesa, 12.

According to this conception a person is an ego enjoying fullness of life or adulthood implying procreative and non-procreative fecundity, ancestral wisdom, social responsibilities and rights, mystical vital power, fulfilled openness (communality, relationality) to the outer world (i.e. the cosmos, living and dead human beings and the other Supernaturals with whom the ego is vitally and mystically united), sacredness, liberty understood as emancipation from socio-economic oppression and natural evils, or as consciousness of self-giving to others and of being accepted by them.⁴²⁹

Another way of interacting with the African sense of fulfillment is through names and referents in the African cultural milieu. A close examination of Igbo names and titles reveals the eschatological significance of naming people, places or things appropriately. Igbo names and titles are well-thought-out, well-defined and well-intended. They reveal the theological, philosophical cum socio-physical world view of the Igbos. They tell a story. They inform, instruct and inculcate values. Most importantly, Igbo names reflect the innate religiosity of the Igbos. They largely depict a strong belief in the supernatural, in the Divine, in the hereafter, in the immaterial and mysterious aspects of reality, in the power, judgment and influence of a Supreme Being. Some express pleas, injunctions, functions, awarded titles, gratitude, proverbs, human finitude, resignation to God's will, experiences, circumstances, hope, conviction or origin of the bearer or the giver. That is why naming ceremonies and taking of titles are important occasions that summarize the persons or the events themselves. The name indicates the personality or explains the essential features of what is so named. Hence, it is not unusual to have phrases, clauses or even whole sentences as names and titles. For instance, we encounter Igbo names and referents such as *Chilaka* – God decides; *Chukwuka* – God is greater or superior; *Ofoka* – justice is greater; *Nkiruka* – the future is greater; *Onwubiko* – Death, please; *Chukwudi* – God exists; *Ugwumba* – the Dignity of a tribe; *Obumneke* – Am I the one who creates?; *Maduabuchi* – man is not God; *Ndubuisi* – life is first; etc. Names and referents are not

⁴²⁹ Charles Nyamiti, "The Incarnation Viewed from the African Understanding of Person," *African Christian Studies* 6, no. 1 (1990): 11.

conferred arbitrarily or detachedly. In the Igbo cultural milieu, names and referents are, more often than not, contextual, expressive of the occasion, mood, tension, celebration, calamity, intention, emotions, aspirations, expectations, events, achievements, attributes or beliefs of both the namer and the named. They denote the identity, function, character and properties, as well as contain much information about whom or what is referred to.

Consequent upon the African sense of eschatological fulfillment is the closely related idea of communion which we shall now turn to.

2. Communion

I think the most profound symbol of communion in Igboland where I come from is the kola nut. It is the hard fruit of a local tree, the kola tree. It is the first thing presented in every social gathering or personal visit to any Igbo home. It is presented by the host and its symbolism is a deep sign of welcome. It is not rejected when offered even if one does not feel like chewing the nut. Rather, it is presented, blessed, broken and distributed. Ideally, only one piece is shared by those gathered if they are few. For larger gatherings, more nuts are brought to give each person a share if possible. It is not usually given as a whole piece to the guest but blessed, broken and shared among those present. When whole pieces are given to individuals, it is also symbolic of some function or message. Often, that whole piece is given to an august visitor or emissary to take back to where they came from or to give to those who sent them, as evidence of their mission. But even when whole pieces are given to individuals to take back home eventually, they also partake in the pieces broken and shared by all, even if each person receives only a bite. The kola nut is not just brought out and broken, even in an informal encounter such as two siblings or neighbors visiting. It is always visibly presented on a saucer, blessed by a religious leader, or a

traditionally titled man, or the oldest man present (in that order of preference), then broken by the youngest and served to all. No matter how brief the visit or meeting was intended, the ritual takes place religiously. The kola nut ritual is like the Eucharist. The blessing is first thanksgiving to God for life and for the blessing of interaction, and then intercession corresponding with the purpose of the meeting or the good of the visitor. It is also sent to those not present, like the Eucharistic *Ite missa est*. It is indeed the Igbo Eucharist: we take it, give thanks, bless it, remember the living and the dead, break it, distribute it, consume and reserve for those not present. The kola nut symbolizes life primarily. It also symbolizes acceptance, peace and invitation to dialogue. Hence, the kola nut ritual takes place before the agenda of a meeting or visit is announced. Its relational importance is that it has several lobes joined together which are broken along those lines and distributed, indicating plurality in our togetherness. It is the ultimate symbol of hospitality and solidarity.

Another symbol of communion for the Igbos is wine. In addition to the normal use of wine for entertainment, the Igbos symbolize serious discussions with wine. If someone knocks at your door with wine, it is not for fun. If you are going to see a lady's family officially to declare your marriage intentions, you go with wine. Wine is also used to give a special invitation to someone you value or to notify them of important intentions. It is a symbol of intended rapprochement. Wine in this sense of communion can also be understood from the communion of the kola nut and also of the Eucharist. It is not for entertainment but a symbol of invitation or intention towards communion. An individual, family or entire community could send wine to another body (individual, family or recipient community as may be the case) in this regard.

Ikechukwu Kanu sums up the idea of communion as an Igbo eschatological reality with the concept of *Igwebuike*.⁴³⁰ The word is actually a complete sentence with deep metaphysical import. It comprises three Igbo words written as *igwe bu ike*. The first component – *igwe* – means a large number, unity, unanimity, collectivity, togetherness, community, assembly, solidarity, complementarity, and other connotations of plurality and overwhelming majority, as against individuality, paucity or even simple majority. The other element – *bu* – is the copula ‘to be’ which is the linking verb in the construct, taking the form ‘is’ in this case. *Ike* translates as strength, power, authority. *Igwebuike*, therefore, connotes ‘number is power’, ‘unity is strength’, ‘togetherness is power’, or any similar inference. Propounding the theory of *Igwebuike* as the driving force of African religion as well as metaphysics, Kanu asserts that:

This provides an ontological horizon that presents being as that which possesses a relational character or mutual relations. As an ideology, *Igwebuike* rests on the African principle of solidarity and complementarity. It argues that ‘to be’ is to live in solidarity and complementarity, and to live outside the parameters of solidarity and complementarity is to suffer alienation. ‘To be’ is ‘to live with the other’, in a community of beings. This is based on the African philosophy of community, which is the underlying principle and unity of African traditional religious and philosophical experience.⁴³¹

Mbiti also highlights this deep sense of communion when he wrote, “I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am.”⁴³² The African notion of existence is all about our interrelatedness and interdependence. Communion is the perfection of personhood. “To find fulfillment, the individual person’s life has need of something that only others, the human community can

⁴³⁰ Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, *A Hermeneutic Approach to African Traditional Religion, Theology and Philosophy* (Jos, Nigeria: Augustinian Publications, 2015), 67.

⁴³¹ Kanu, 67.

⁴³² John S. Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy* (New York: Praeger, 1969), 108.

provide.”⁴³³ This is the point Achebe makes in his widely translated classic, *Things Fall Apart*, about the Igbo culture:

A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to prevent them from starving. They all have food in their own homes. When we gather in the moonlit village ground it is not because of the moon. Every man can see it in his own compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so.⁴³⁴

Nyamity advances this notion of relationality and communality in Africa to mean that:

A person is fundamentally open to the outside: the community of the living and the dead, the Supernaturals, and the cosmos when he derives his life, power and sacrality. Indeed it is through the community that the individual obtains his life and its fulfillment (personality). It is the community that is the ultimate source of his life and personality: he is named and educated by it, and he is brought to adulthood and fecundity through it. Nor can he exercise the fullness of his sacred vital forces outside the community.⁴³⁵

The individual’s relation to the community is so intimate that he belongs to it more than the community belongs to him. His individuality, personal responsibilities and rights are acknowledged, but they are dominated by the community idea.⁴³⁶ Community is the greatest African cultural heritage. This community encompasses women, men, the elderly, children, sick, healthy, poor, rich, living, unborn, dead, and even nature and the ecosystem. It is a “community of creation,” in the words of Elizabeth Johnson.⁴³⁷ It is a community where all are accorded a fair space to thrive in.

3. Memory

Many a time, memory is overlooked as an important dimension of the eschatology of any given people or group. When Christ instituted the Holy Eucharist as a sign of his eschatological presence among his followers, he commanded: “Do this in memory of me!” (Luke 22:19). Their

⁴³³ Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred?*, 12.

⁴³⁴ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, African Writers Series Classics (Oxford: Heinemann, 2008), 133.

⁴³⁵ Nyamiti, “The Incarnation Viewed from the African Understanding of Person,” 9.

⁴³⁶ Nyamiti, 9.

⁴³⁷ Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*.

memory of Jesus would form their eschatology; this memory would be a memory of Incarnation, in-breaking of God into human history, suffering, death, resurrection, perpetual presence, *parousia*, Kingdom, moral rectitude, glory. In fact, memory sums up the elements that typically make up the discussion of the last things – death, burial and the hereafter. Memory also has to do with the past, the history of the individual or group. Memory is what binds people together. At a given time, shared memory is the *raison d'être* for the cohesion of a group, sense of direction for the individual and the string binding the living and the dead. I like Metz's portrayal of *memoria passionis* in his theology of memory.⁴³⁸ I am a genocide survivor; albeit not directly – my parents were survivors of the Biafran genocide (1967-70), shortly after the Nigerian independence of 1960. At the end of the thirty-month Biafran carnage which saw an estimated one million children starve to death and three million civilians killed, the retreating federal troops passed by my (maternal) grandfather's house and were astonished that he and his family had survived the killings. His name was Christopher Okoro. They shot him in his house, after the official ceasefire. His crime was that he had survived the genocide. The name Biafra was decreed off the map ever since and has remained so, as part of official efforts to bury a people and their history. It is a history we live with and a reality we still go through in many ways. Colonization and totalitarian rule seek to destroy memory rather than install justice, security and progress. This is slavery. The memory of accumulated suffering is the source of strength to continue to resist modern cynics of political power. *Memoria passionis* continues to revolt against this systemic annihilation of memory. A people's memory of suffering (even in this pandemic) is their consciousness, their identity, their strength, their fierce resolve to initiate a future different

⁴³⁸ Johann Baptist Metz, "The Future: Ex Memoria Passionis," in Ewert H. Cousins (Ed.), *Hope and the Future of Man*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 126.

from their unjustified history of suffering, exploitation and humiliation. Magesa sees this memory as *anamnesis* and considers it the core of any given people, particularly Africa:

Calling upon African historical and spiritual memory, what we might describe as ancestral *anamnesis*, is not a lame attempt at self-pity with no hope for success. Rather, it should help the continent to avoid being misrepresented and repeatedly falling victim to previous cruelties. Africa's 'repatriation' of her history, the recovery and renewal of memory, is necessary for the success of the search for a positive outlook of her specific identity in order to put it at the positive service of the world.... It is essential never to lose sight of the fact that without a past a people can have no future: the past influences the present, while both give direction to the future. How can one go forward without a place to stand? Core values of a people preserved in its tradition provide such a standpoint.⁴³⁹

Talking about memory with regard to death and immortality, Mbiti asserts:

Physical death starts the long process of removing the individual from the NOW period, until, after four or five generations, he disappears completely when the last person who knew him also dies physically. It is here that we must appreciate the importance of 'remembering' the departed, which is one of the most dominant features of African religious concepts and activities. By remembering the departed, his relatives retain him in their *mituki* period, in what may be called 'personal immortality' since he is remembered personally by name, and is addressed as such during the act of pouring out libation and giving of food – which constitute acts of 'remembrance', fellowship and renewal of relationship between the living and the living-dead. For that reason, the departed of up to four or five generations are best described as the 'living-dead' for they are dead in body but alive in spirit and in the memories of their surviving relatives. When five generations or so are over, then the living-dead is remembered no longer by name: he now *dies* relative to human beings, but survives in spirit form, in the state of *collective immortality* (where his spirit is one of myriads of unknown spirits of those who once were human beings and those created by God as the species of spirits).⁴⁴⁰

One important dimension to memory is legacy. The highest legacy for the African is the legacy of a good name. These are the acclaimed heroes of society and the community never ceases to tell the future generations about them. The encounter in Homer's *Iliad* between the Greek hero

⁴³⁹ Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred?*, 19.

⁴⁴⁰ Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background*, 30.

Achilles and his goddess mother Thetis before the Trojan War captures this vividly.⁴⁴¹ The screen adaptation, an epic movie named *Troy* presents it this way:

Thetis (to Achilles): If you stay in Larissa, you will find peace. You will find a wonderful woman, and you will have sons and daughters, who will have children. And they'll all love you and remember your name. But when your children are dead, and their children after them, your name will be forgotten... If you go to Troy, glory will be yours. They will write stories about your victories in thousands of years! And the world will remember your name. But if you go to Troy, you will never come back... for your glory walks hand-in-hand with your doom. And I shall never see you again.⁴⁴²

As we see from Christ's institution of the Eucharist at his point of death, legacy makes death not to be annihilation but *memoria*. The dead live on in their good deeds, in their offspring, in their earthly attainments and in the memories shared with the living. This is the case when Africans remember their ancestors. The cult of the ancestors is just an eschatological re-enactment of the memory of our forebears. Not every dead member is regarded as an ancestor in Igbo eschatology, but only those who were known to have lived uprightly. The essence of the cult of the ancestors is to uphold their memories as role models for the living and to implore their intercession over the family and clan. They are not worshipped because the Africans see them only as intermediaries and ministers of the great God whom the Igbo call *Chukwu*. *Chi* means god(s); *ukwu* means great. The appellation *great* is only added for the Supreme Being, and then it is capitalized and used only in the singular.

For the Africans, life is a continuum, involving the unborn, the living and the dead. It is a communion of persons, history and creation. The elderly are revered as closer to the spiritual world because of their grey hair. They are not discarded in old age but left in the family house as

⁴⁴¹ Homer, *Iliad*, MHRA Tudor & Stuart Translations; v. 20 (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2017), 185 (IX.395-400).

⁴⁴² "Troy - Movie Quotes - Rotten Tomatoes," accessed May 15, 2020, <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/troy/quotes/>.

a vital component of the family memory and they do assist in the children's upbringing as well. The corpses and graves of the dead are also cherished and kept near the homestead and not in far-away cemeteries, except 'bad' deaths, disease, etc. The funeral rites are performed with great dignity and solemnity even as the loss is felt. However, there is hope that the person is not gone but remains in other dimensions. Moltmann sums up this notion of memory: "Anyone who forgets the rights of the dead will be indifferent toward the lives of those to come as well. Without a 'culture of remembrance' that tries to do justice to the dead, there will also be no 'culture of hope' that will open up a future for our children."⁴⁴³ Magesa frames the memory and reverence for ancestral genealogy in his writing:

Ancestral land, which means the space or location where the ancestors lie in death, is *home*. It represents the fulfillment of time, of human life, of history. Wherever a person may actually reside, he or she is not complete without ancestral identity, symbolized by ancestral land. You may have a house in the city far away from your ancestral burial grounds, but that is just a house. You may even spend most of your life there, but it is not home. 'Home' remains the ancestral space. This is where one desires to be buried in death, together with 'one's own people.'⁴⁴⁴

Memory serves as a constant reminder to humanity that we are not alone. It does not promote the destruction of any aspect of creation but enforces recollection of our interrelatedness and interconnectedness. Indeed, there is wisdom in George Santayana's famous dictum that "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."⁴⁴⁵ As Theodore McCall affirms, memory does shape our ecological attitude and it serves as a hermeneutical key to ecological eschatology while enabling solidarity with forgotten creation.⁴⁴⁶ According to him,

⁴⁴³ Jürgen Moltmann, "Is There Life after Death?," in *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology*, ed. J. C. Polkinghorne and Michael Welker, Theology for the Twenty-First Century (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2000), 255.

⁴⁴⁴ Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred?*, 58–59.

⁴⁴⁵ George Santayana, *Reason in Common Sense* (Constable, 1910), 284.

⁴⁴⁶ McCall, *The Greenie's Guide to the End of the World*, 26, 29, 227.

“remembrance of a particular case of destruction of creation spurs environmental activism.”⁴⁴⁷

Closely tied to the concept of memory as an eschatological tool with ecological implications are the notions of time and space.

4. Time and Space

Mbiti makes a valid claim that “time and history are essential elements of eschatology. Any consideration or understanding of Eschatology must presuppose a certain attitude towards Time and History.”⁴⁴⁸ In the same vein, according to Magesa: “the African conception of time cannot be understood accurately when separated from space, history, or tradition, and the (complete) fulfillment of the individual.”⁴⁴⁹ He emphasizes that “time, space, and history all combine (in life) to bring about human fulfilment.”⁴⁵⁰

The African sense of time, space and history is a unique one. Africans do not have a linear sense of time, that is, mathematical time. The African sense of time is experiential. Time is talked about with reference to human beings, and not as some abstract concept. Similarly, time has no end. There is no consummation or end of the world belief.⁴⁵¹ For me, life and death are like day and night; night simply ushers in a new day, and it is characteristic of day to progress to night. I wish to present an image here of when we go to the carwash, at that point when the driver puts the car into neutral and can do nothing else to control the car as it glides through the programmed scheme of things activated thence. Augustine, African theologian and Father of the Church, gives us an insight into the African sense of time in his *Confessions*. He is baffled indeed by this phenomenon:

⁴⁴⁷ McCall, 226.

⁴⁴⁸ Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background*, 24.

⁴⁴⁹ Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred?*, 55.

⁴⁵⁰ Magesa, 52.

⁴⁵¹ Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background*, 56.

What, then, is time? If no one asks me, I know; if I want to explain it to someone who asks me, I do not know.... Now, what about those two times, past and future: in what sense do they have real being, if the past no longer exists and the future does not exist yet? As for present time, if that were always present and never slipped away into the past, it would not be time at all; it would be eternity. If, therefore, the present's only claim to be called 'time' is that it is slipping away into the past, how can we assert that this thing *is*, when its only title to being is that it will soon cease to be? In other words, we cannot really say that time exists, except because it tends to non-being.⁴⁵²

Augustine's quagmire reverberates in Mbiti's submission that Africans have a "two-dimension concept of Time. This constitutes an indefinite 'past' which is the terminus of all phenomena and events, and which is dominated by the myth; and an intensely active 'present' in which the individual or community is most conscious of his (its) existence and being." He continues that "there is virtually no future dimension of Time, beyond a few years at most."⁴⁵³ Booth concurs with Mbiti that:

In traditional Africa 'time' does not exist as an 'empty container' into which events may be paced. On the contrary, there is no 'time' apart from events. The distant future is not easily or naturally spoken of, not because African are incapable of doing so but because it 'contains' no events; it has not been 'humanized'.⁴⁵⁴

Similarly, the African notion of space is not individualistic or limited to the human realm. It has a cosmic dimension with respected laws which discourage infringement. The spatio-temporal aspect of African eschatology is nature-embracing and creation-promoting.

5. Creation

African eschatology is inherently an ecological eschatology. Rather than the idea of dominion, Africans understand creation as a cosmic whole, human beings inclusive. Africans strive to

⁴⁵² Augustine, *The Confessions*, 256–57 (XI.14.17).

⁴⁵³ Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background*, 30.

⁴⁵⁴ Newell S. Booth Jr., "Time and African Beliefs Revisited," in *Religious Plurality in Africa: Essays in Honour of John S. Mbiti*, ed. Jacob K Olupona and Sulayman S Nyang, Religion and Society (Hague, Netherlands) 32 (Berlin ; New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1993), 90.

maintain ecological balance in all they do, for they are a people of nature. The role of human beings is to shepherd creation and ensure the survival and thriving of each unit of the ecosystem. The universe is comprised of the physical and the spiritual realms with both in mutual communion. “The source of the self-definition of the peoples of Africa, their culture, arises from and tends towards a holistic perception of the universe, which, as we have seen, is spiritual. Thus, what is not spiritual? What is not sacred?”⁴⁵⁵ Doetis Roberts confirms that in the African eschatology, creation goes back to God as its origin, for “the value of nature and all creation is a gift from God, the author of creation.”⁴⁵⁶ This is very obvious from the name given to God in the Igbo language of southeastern Nigeria: *Chineke*. “*Chi-na-eke* is God the Creator who created the world out of nothing. He is *Chukwu Onye Okike*, that is, Creator and Great Father.”⁴⁵⁷ Mbiti also posits that in the African dual functionalist view of creation, “the spirit world is a complete copy of the physical, and it is not removed from the latter. It is a land of rivers, hills, animals, etc.; and the activities of its inhabitants resemble those of people in this life, such as working in the fields, keeping cattle, establishing families, and the like.”⁴⁵⁸ In the African context, creation is a cherished gift from the Creator, to whom we also owe our being. Therefore, Africans use natural resources with modest caution and habitually preserve the rest of creation. Africans do not hold an eschatology that expects the annihilation of creation, but a creation-fulfilling eschatology.

ii. What Can Ecotheology Benefit from African Eschatology?

African eschatology finds a lot of parallels with the Old Testament eschatology more than with the New Testament. To start with, there is no notion of heaven or hell in both the Old Testament

⁴⁵⁵ Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred?*, 26.

⁴⁵⁶ J. Deotis Roberts, “Dignity and Destiny: Black Reflections on Eschatology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Black Theology*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins and Edward P. Antonio, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 216, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521879866.016>.

⁴⁵⁷ Manus and Obioma, “Preaching the ‘Green Gospel’ in Our Environment,” 3.

⁴⁵⁸ Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background*, 133.

eschatology and African eschatology. Kingdom and salvation are of this world, in this life, either in our age or in our children's time. Redemption is not liberation from sin but from injustice and oppression, heralding peace, long life and material prosperity. Deliverance is not from sin or death but from enemies of humanity and enemies of creation. Eternal reward is biological fecundity and continuity of lineage. These can be seen in the promises made both to the Patriarchs and to Israel in the Old Testament (e.g., Genesis 12:1-3; 15: 4-5,13-16; Leviticus 26: 3-13; Deuteronomy 11: 8-15; 2 Samuel 7: 9-17). Even the covenant with Noah (and all creation) has this sense of earthly fulfillment (Genesis 8:21-9:17). Ezekiel likewise prophesied that dry bones shall rise from their graves back to their land (Ezekiel 37: 1-14). This is a stark contrast with the New Testament which seems to portray that Jesus has come to transport us to a Kingdom: Paradise (e.g., Matthew 20:21; Mark 1:14; Luke 23:43; John 14:3, 17:16, 18:36; Acts 7: 56; 1 Thessalonians 4: 16-17; Rev. 7:1-17; 21:1).

Furthermore, both African eschatology and Old Testament eschatology have similar notions of time as cyclic rather than linear. "We find a 'cyclic' view of Time in the book of Ecclesiastes (e.g. 1:4-11, 3:1-8, 15, etc.) where we hear that 'what has been is what will be, ... and there is nothing new under the sun' (1:9), and 'that which is, already has been' (3:15)."⁴⁵⁹ Old Testament time is humanized and not arithmetic. In this, we recall the narratives therein contain 'in the reign of...' and the recounting of genealogies which the first book of the New Testament also opens with. Old Testament narratives are about people, what the people did and what happened to them, with long family registers rather than mere events. The Old Testament also has the African sense of care for creation. We may juxtapose how Noah saved the animals together with

⁴⁵⁹ Mbiti, 39, 127.

humanity from the waters of the flood (Genesis 6-9) with the New Testament story of how the swine were destroyed in the water on account of the Gerasene demoniac healed in Luke 8.

In addition, there is no end of time in the Old Testament. Divine assurance is not till the end of time as Christ assures his disciples, but God assures his elect to be with their generations yet unborn, without any time limits or consummation of creation. The Old Testament has an earthly orientation like African eschatology rather than the otherworldly eschatology of the New Testament. Here we can contrast the story of Abram and Lot dividing the vast resources of the land before them as their eschatology, with the story of Ananias and Sapphira who perished for not giving up their earthly resources because of their new eschatology. Divine reward for the Old Testament as for African eschatology was for the *hic et nunc* (the here and now), not a place at the right hand or left hand of Jesus in a future paradise. Sin is not individual but collective in the African sense. When one man sins, Israel loses war. More and more theologians are converging on the acknowledgment that the human destruction of creation is a sin, and humanity is losing the battle for ecological sustainability.

In the light of the above, Joseph Masika argues that “the interaction between biblical witness and African religion and worldviews may contribute to the healing of creation.”⁴⁶⁰ Buttressing this point further, Masika explains that African worldview/cosmology is the major factor influencing how they relate to the rest of creation but Western influence is fast corroding African ecological hermeneutics and value system. Echoing Lynn White’s verdict, Harvey Sindima gives a rather harsh definition of Western worldview as a:

mechanistic perspective that views all things as lifeless commodities to be understood scientifically and to be used for human ends [in contrast to the African life-centred cosmology] which can better serve their needs for cultural

⁴⁶⁰ Masika, “Doing Ecology with African Creation Wisdom,” 1.

development and social justice in an ecologically responsible context.... since it stresses the bondedness, the interconnectedness, of all living beings.⁴⁶¹

Commenting on this, Masika contests that:

Based on this understanding, scholars (especially Africans) seek to recover aspects of the African worldview which predominantly inform their ecological practices in dialogue with biblical witness. Their hope is to transcend Western views, recognized to be 'largely responsible for many eco-disasters faced by Africa and which has led us in many ways to the global crisis we faced today.'⁴⁶²

Without gainsaying the culpability of the West in Africa's ecological dearth, I think Africa has also played her own part in her ecological misfortunes mostly through ignorance, greed and corruption. Nonetheless, African eschatology continues to advocate for a responsible relationship with creation and maintaining an integral ecology. These are valid takeaways in framing an African ecotheology as well. We shall now turn to gaining more insights from an ecological eschatology in seeking solution to our ecological crisis.

d. Cosmic Redemption: The *Parousia*

In the sections following, we interrogate the future of creation in the future coming. Martinus de Wit underscores the quagmire surrounding ecological eschatology and identifies three dominant currents. The first is annihilation, destruction of the world; it offers no motivation for earthkeeping. The second focus is the renewal of creation and this has a strong ecofriendly posture. The third school of thought acknowledges that there are very different eschatological views in the bible itself.⁴⁶³ This paper now turns to these eschatological positions in search of the true place of creation in the promised Kingdom.

⁴⁶¹ Harvey Sindima, "Community of Life: Ecological Theology in African Perspective," in *Liberating Life: Contemporary Approaches to Ecological Theology*, ed. Charles Birch, William Eakin, and Jay B. McDaniel (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), 137; Masika, "Doing Ecology with African Creation Wisdom," 1.

⁴⁶² Masika, "Doing Ecology with African Creation Wisdom," 2.

⁴⁶³ Wit, "Christ-Centred Ethical Behaviour and Ecological Crisis," 5.

i. Will God Save His Creation?

The Gospel of John (3:16) proclaims that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son. This passage does not project that God sent his Son into the world because he loved ‘humanity’ only but that he sent his Son into the world because he ‘so loved the world.’ In trying to reconcile personal and cosmic hope in traditional eschatologies, Jürgen Moltmann writes in his iconic work, *The Coming of God*: “The salvation of the individual and, in the individual, the salvation of the soul, was so much at the center of things that the salvation of the body, human society and the cosmos were pushed out on to the sidelines, or did not receive any attention at all.”⁴⁶⁴ Since God’s love is professed for the world, beyond humanity, would the salvation Christ brings be only for humanity or for the rest of creation as well? It would seem that God sent his Son to save the world that he loves; humanity is not saved from the world but the world is saved from humanity. Ernst Conradie puts it thus: “The Christian message of salvation cannot be understood as salvation *from* creation (as *creatura*) but can only be understood as salvation *of* the created world.”⁴⁶⁵

In the same vein, Pauline eschatology has also been scrutinized for its ecological promise. He talks about the future glory of creation in Romans 8:21 that: “creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” Colossians 1:15-20 further emphasizes that Christ is “the firstborn of all creation.” Christ is the reason for a creation beyond decay. As theologians attest, “salvation in Christ extends beyond people, including the whole of creation.”⁴⁶⁶ Indeed the resurrection is evidence of continuity between

⁴⁶⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, 1st Fortress Press ed.. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), xv.

⁴⁶⁵ E. M. Conradie, ed., *Creation and Salvation. Vol. 1, A Mosaic of Selected Classic Christian Theologies*, Studies in Religion and the Environment ; v. 5 (Berlin: Lit, 2012), 18.

⁴⁶⁶ Wit, “Christ-Centred Ethical Behaviour and Ecological Crisis,” 5.

creation and eschatology, and not only the resurrection but the entire salvific Christ event.⁴⁶⁷ As Miller argues, “the purpose of creation is incarnation. The effect of God communicating God’s self in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ is the inauguration of the kingdom of God. If Christ inaugurates the kingdom, then there must be a unity between the Christ event in history and the eschatological Christ event.”⁴⁶⁸ McCall affirms an intimate soteriological connection between humanity and creation, emphasizing the resurrection of all creation since God loves the world and would neither abandon nor destroy it.⁴⁶⁹ Taking a cue from Paul (Col. 1:15), he posits that “all of creation waits for redemption through Christ who is, ‘the firstborn of all creation’ (not just human beings).”⁴⁷⁰ How then can we understand the consummation of creation in a coherent eschatology?

ii. Consummation of Creation

In his theology of the consummation of creation, Vítor Westhelle asserts: “As this world had a beginning, so, it is teleologically oriented toward its end. Creation and consummation are symmetrical to each other, as in the apt expression of Hermann Gunkel, *Endzeit gleicht Urzeit*, the end is like the beginning.”⁴⁷¹ He entertains the notion of creaturely restoration at the consummation of creation, giving credits to Teilhard de Chardin. He opines that:

Teilhard was as brilliant as controversial both as a theologian and also in the field of his own training, paleontology. But he was the most influential apologist for the controversial early Christian idea of the restoration of all things (*apokatastasis ton panton*). Controversial it is because it implies a form of radical universalism. Even if the controversial term does not appear in that passage of Paul quoted by

⁴⁶⁷ Miller, “Deep Responsibility for the Deep Future,” 451.

⁴⁶⁸ Miller, 451.

⁴⁶⁹ McCall, *The Greenie’s Guide to the End of the World*, 18–21.

⁴⁷⁰ McCall, 226.

⁴⁷¹ Westhelle, *Eschatology and Space*, 2.

Teilhard (1 Corinthians 15:28) it does appear in a speech by Peter in Acts 3:21 and is arguably the guiding idea in the quotation from Paul.⁴⁷²

Although theologians anticipate the consummation of all things,⁴⁷³ as to what this future consummation consists of, Martinus de Wit simply concedes that the end is open to mystery and surprise.⁴⁷⁴ However, there have been voices for apocalyptic annihilation of creation as well as voices for the eschatological fulfillment or completion of God's work. In this biblical future, scholars like Richard Miller project that since the resurrection of Christ came about through catastrophe, the realization of the Kingdom and the fulfillment of creation can also come through human or natural catastrophe albeit not induced but permitted by God.⁴⁷⁵ Our next section will further explore the implications of each of these positions.

iii. Last Things or New Creation?

What awaits creation at the end of time? Is creation heading towards the last things or towards a new creation? Based on current studies as we have seen, eschatologies of the last things are becoming discountenanced in favor of eschatologies of cosmic renewal. For scholars like Theodore McCall in his insightful book, *The Greenie's Guide to the End of the World: Ecology and Eschatology*, death is not the final state to which all things are subject to. Although he acknowledges the eschatological limitations of human knowledge, he is skeptical of eschatologies of the last things because the entropy of the universe negates our faith. He claims that entropy of the cosmos is a denial of God's existence and a rejection of Christian hope.

On the contrary, time and creation will be transformed in the *eschaton*, according to McCall. He propounds an ecological eschatology tasked with mediating our ecological crises through the

⁴⁷² Westhelle, 67.

⁴⁷³ McCall, *The Greenie's Guide to the End of the World*, 19.

⁴⁷⁴ Wit, "Christ-Centred Ethical Behaviour and Ecological Crisis," 7.

⁴⁷⁵ Miller, "Deep Responsibility for the Deep Future," 452.

lens of eschatology as the hope of the transformed world. In addition, he identifies two models of transformation of creation – the objective model and the subjective model. The objective model highlights God’s role in the transformation of creation, explaining how God might transform creation. The subjective model focuses on the processes of the world in the final consummation of all things, explaining how humans and the rest of creation might participate in that transformation. He identifies Conradie’s notion of ‘material inscription’ of the cosmos as an example of the objective model, which he faults however for lacking active human participation. Then liturgical theology becomes an example of the subjective model, viewing the world as sacrament, and through the liturgy, we participate in the transformation of things.⁴⁷⁶

Similarly, Elizabeth Johnson explores the metaphor of new creation.⁴⁷⁷ She insists that the earthly end is not final and she debunks the notion of “annihilation forever.”⁴⁷⁸ This finds credence both in Hayes’ submission of the end, *Parousia* and new creation whereby he maintains that the destiny of the world is intimately intertwined with human destiny,⁴⁷⁹ as well as in Moltmann’s cosmic eschatology of a new heaven and a new earth signifying a new creation.⁴⁸⁰ The ultimate purpose of creation – past, present and future – is the glorification of God, Moltmann asserts.⁴⁸¹

Thus our study has progressed from a theology of creation (ecothology) to a theology of new creation (eschatology). However, “the answer to the question on what basis Christians behave ethically in the midst of ecological crises is not as straightforward as one might have hoped for, notwithstanding a long tradition affirming the role of Christians in creation care and emphasizing

⁴⁷⁶ McCall, *The Greenie’s Guide to the End of the World*.

⁴⁷⁷ Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 146.

⁴⁷⁸ Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 219.

⁴⁷⁹ Zachary Hayes, *What Are They Saying about the End of the World?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 50.

⁴⁸⁰ Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, 257.

⁴⁸¹ Moltmann, 323.

an eschatology of renewal rather than destruction.”⁴⁸² Sequel to this, Steven Bouma-Prediger highlights five characteristics of the new creation in God’s good future: it is earthy and earthly; God’s dwelling; heaven and earth unite; evil over; unusual city. An earthy eschatology is an eschatology for Christian earthkeeping. Hence the biblical eschatology of (re)new(ed) creation should inspire us to become earthkeepers. The goal of delineating a cosmic eschatology is to present a valid eschatological rationale for an integral ecology as it recognizes the enduring goodness of creation as well as the future glory of creation, rather than present attitudes of neglect, exploitation and destruction of God’s creation.

e. Going Forward: Greening Salvation and Humanity

Having exposed pertinent issues concerning our ecological crisis from different nuances, this section narrows down all the theoretical foundations laid so far to pragmatic recommendations on the two levels of religious and civil ecological sustainability.

i. Theological Guidelines

Religious bodies have a lot to do in inculcating proper ecological spirituality in their followers. Although Christianity has become more ecologically aware and proactive, Elizabeth Johnson still regrets that Christianity has not done enough yet. Lamenting the dearth of pastoral ecology, she recommends that Christianity face this crisis with as much vigor that it puts into other important issues. The ecological vocation of Christians should get more emphasis in Christian sermons, texts and programs. This should deepen the invitation to show love and justice to both humankind and the otherkind. Such conversion is necessary to attain ecological and human

⁴⁸² Wit, “Christ-Centred Ethical Behaviour and Ecological Crisis,” 2; David G. Horrell, *The Bible and the Environment: Towards a Critical Ecological Biblical Theology*, Biblical Challenges in the Contemporary World (London ; Oakville, CT: Equinox, 2010); David G. Horrell et al., eds., *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010).

flourishing where all creation is protected, dignified and sustained.⁴⁸³ This Christian call is enforced by a consensus of scholars who affirm that religion can encourage a change of ecological values and attitudes. Buttressing this even while calling for caution as well, Tucker and Grim assert: “We are not claiming that religions hold the answers to complex environmental problems, but that they can be active participants in finding solutions along with scientists, economists, and policymakers. Religions are thus necessary but not sufficient in themselves for achieving a sustainable future.”⁴⁸⁴

In line with this, Clive Ayre offers theological recommendations in response to our ecological crises. Very importantly, ecotheology as a practical public theology should engage all related social, agricultural, scientific and theological fields more constructively in multiple dialogues rather than monologues. Again, theological reflection should adopt an eco-mission posture rather than anthropocentric perspectives. Ecotheology should pay urgent and contextual attention to marginalized victims of environmental degradation and climate change. The critique of ‘top-down’ ecological and administrative models should give way also in the Church to more participatory models which promote the integrity of all creation. Creation care should be a priority in inter-religious dialogue due to the magnitude of the global ecological threat and the potentials of ecumenical action to mitigate the environmental crisis. In addition, it is hoped that ecclesial bodies as a matter of divine vocation, walk the talk from rhetoric to action, including an eco-mission budget for what Conradie terms “mission in the public square.”⁴⁸⁵

⁴⁸³ Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 260–61.

⁴⁸⁴ Grim and Tucker, *Ecology and Religion*, 11.

⁴⁸⁵ Clive W. Ayre, “Where on Earth Is the Church? Theological Reflection on the Nature, Mission, Governance and Ministry of the Church amidst the Global Environmental Crisis,” in *Christian Faith and the Earth: Current Paths and Emerging Horizons in Ecotheology*, ed. Ernst M. Conradie et al. (London, UK ; New York, NY: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 137–56.

These recommendations highlight the Church's dual mission – *missio ad intra* and *missio ad extra* (that is, the Church's evangelical commitment to both her internal members and the external world respectively). In truth to her divine mandate to witness to justice and peace, Edward Obi thus insists that: "The Church must be prophetic in its response to injustice and must be vigilant to ward off oppressive situations. Moreover the Church must identify and stay engaged with officials of state at all levels, since they are the ones whose decisions ultimately affect people's lives for good or ill."⁴⁸⁶ It is the hope of this essay therefore to pull eco-theology from its placid place in the shelves of the Church's political awareness to its deservedly central place in the Church's core theology by establishing its eminent ecological and eschatological value. Ministers and theologians alike must become aware of the urgency of our ecological crisis and their constructive and interpretative roles in rolling back anti-environmental stances. On this, the Harvard conferences on religion and ecology

recognized the disjunction of religious traditions and modern environmental issues, noting the historical and cultural divide between texts written in earlier periods for different ends. They worked within a process of retrieval of texts and traditions, critical reevaluation, and reconstruction for present circumstances. For example, how can the idea of "dominion" over nature in genesis 1:26–28 be reinterpreted as "stewardship" of creation? They underscored the gap between theory and practice, noting that textual passages celebrating nature do not automatically lead to protection of nature. In fact, many societies with texts praising nature often deforested their landscapes. Thus an important dialogue is still needed between environmental historians and historians of religions to explore the interaction of intellectual ideas and practices in relation to actual environmental conditions, both historically and at present.⁴⁸⁷

Beyond ecotheological tracts and propositions, it is also essential that theologians instill into humanity's consciousness why we should really care for creation as well as the relationship between integral ecology and authentic Christian faith. As Masika indicates, "by caring for

⁴⁸⁶ Obi, "Mining and Resource Extraction in Nigeria: Social Justice and Corporate Responsibility," 115.

⁴⁸⁷ Grim and Tucker, *Ecology and Religion*, 8.

God's creation we bring him glory, we show respect for what he has made, we demonstrate love to our neighbour and a sincere concern for the poor, and we point people to the paradise that awaits us when Christ returns.”⁴⁸⁸ To achieve this, the proper place of the theology of creation as an important element of Catholic identity should reflect in an updated theological curriculum for Catholic institutions and houses of vocational formation.⁴⁸⁹ Above all, it is hoped that greening religion would go a long way in greening our sociopolitical sensibilities as well.

ii. Sociopolitical Recommendations

The Nigerian flag consists of three equal vertical stripes with the colors *green-white-green*. I recall one of the first things we learned in school as kids was the meaning of some of these national symbols including the colors of the flag. We were taught that: “The green colour stands for farmlands and forest on which the wealth of the country depends and in which most Nigerians are employed; the white colour stands for peace and unity – which are important to the growth of the nation and its people.”⁴⁹⁰ From her independence in 1960, Nigeria set out to be green. Unfortunately, these ideals can hardly be said to be the case presently. Her farmlands, wealth, natural resources and livelihood for the citizenry are turning bleak. Peace and unity cannot be sustained under political misrule and resource mismanagement. Petroleum which is the mainstay of her economy has become a sad national story. The most drastic effect of petroleum exploration in Nigeria has been the ecological devastation of the Niger Delta region. The research has so far highlighted the effects of greed, lawlessness and ignorance in the raging ecological crises in the Niger Delta.

⁴⁸⁸ Masika, “Doing Ecology with African Creation Wisdom,” 7.

⁴⁸⁹ Irwin, *Commentary on Laudato Si'*, 213–14.

⁴⁹⁰ Dayo Ogunniyi and H.O.N. Oboli, *Spectrum Social Studies for Junior Secondary Schools 1: Living and Working Together*, Revised edition (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 2006), 63.

Ecological crises go hand in glove with humanitarian crises. Therefore, both should be eradicated by all means. From our research, practical dialogue is the key to resolving the ecological malaise hovering over the Niger Delta. The government should stop paying lip service to ecological and developmental redress but should be transparent, sincerely committed and hasten up in fulfilling its promises as well as facilitating the recommendations of the United Nations on the way forward in the Niger Delta. The need for legislation, accountability and implementation of relevant laws cannot be overemphasized. The principle of survival in this economic limbo of necessity demands the diversification of resources and export power of the country. Revenues and misconduct should be properly accounted for. The dividends of the common patrimony should not be privatized or sectionalized but equitably applied to facilitate the integral development of the polity. Very importantly, the petroleum refineries should be put to work to put a plug to the economic drain therefrom.

More still, multinationals should adopt a fair sense of corporate social responsibility in line with international norms, and apply the same high standards they operate with in their countries of origin. The host communities should not be marginalized but given a sense of dignity and safety. The traditional rulers should be actively engaged to ensure local cooperation and the youths of the area should have more shots at the many employment opportunities, especially juicy positions with a sense of balancing with other areas. The demilitarization of the region should not be compromised by any party at all. There should be ongoing mass sensitization urging the people towards socially and ecologically accepted ways of acting henceforth.

Curbing today's ecological crisis cannot be effected without a conscious, comprehensive and consistent framework for ecological sustainability both at the global, national and grassroots levels. Humanity must be reoriented socially, economically, technologically and culturally

towards a positive ecological ethic. As most of the human onslaught on the world is informed by technology, Lewis Moncrief recommends the proper relationship between humanity and technology, citing H. G. Rickover. He writes:

It is important to maintain a humanistic attitude toward technology; to recognize clearly that since it is the product of human effort, technology can have no legitimate purpose but to serve man – man in general, not merely some men; future generations, not merely those who currently wish to gain advantage for themselves; man in the totality of his humanity, encompassing all his manifold interests and needs, not merely some one particular concern of his. When viewed humanistically, technology is seen not as an end in itself but a means to an end, the end being determined by man himself in accordance with the laws prevailing in his society.⁴⁹¹

We need to go green. We need to put our hands together to ameliorate this climate change and global warming. Ecology should also be given more attention in the schools especially from younger years, in line with social studies and citizenship education. Respect and harmony for creation would definitely enhance respect and harmony with the rest of humanity. The memories of past hurts should also be addressed with a disposition towards healing, reconciliation and progress.

Conclusion

One good thing Lynn White, Jr. has done is that he precipitated the recent debates and re-evaluation of biblical ecology vis-à-vis the modern ecological crises. He was not the first to make the call but his essay struck at the right chords indeed. This call on humanity has midwived the creation of beneficial ecological disciplines. Hence Willis Jenkins lauds this development as the “moral implications of religious cosmology to environmental problems helped to develop the academic fields of environmental ethics and of religion and ecology.”⁴⁹² Even papal ecological

⁴⁹¹ Moncrief, “The Cultural Basis for Our Environmental Crisis,” 511.

⁴⁹² Jenkins, “After Lynn White,” 283.

pronouncements since White all seem to be responding directly to his claims that Christianity's anthropocentrism and disenchantment of nature were the major driving forces behind the aggressive environmental decline we now witness.

Consequently, the Pope has clarified the Church's stand on modern environmental concerns by engaging our ecological crisis from a pastoral standpoint. His teachings on *imago Dei* and human dominion and the furor these components of the Christian creation theology have generated, including the perennial vocation of man to tend the earth, are all in tandem with the verdicts of theologians and Christian environmental ethicists. Although the notion of dominion is prone to exploitation, it is proper to set aright the tasks and limits of dominion, which is the God-given responsibility to take care of God's creation as "worthless stewards" and "earthenware vessels".

Christianity is not antithetical to nature, neither does she enjoin her faithful to ravish the earth. In actual fact, the contrary is the case: Christianity preaches responsible and moderate relations among individuals and with the rest of creation. Elizabeth Johnson identifies this ecotheological formation as the "community of creation" paradigm.⁴⁹³ Although, religion exerts behavioral influence on men, religion is not responsible for all men do. It is a fact that Catholic Christianity preaches against abortion, contraceptives, divorce, adultery, capital punishment, many instances of biomedical technology and other moral exhortations which largely go unheeded. In the same vein, the Abrahamic religions should not be the only religions on the dock as research continues to show that other religions originating in Asia may not be ecologically better if judged by the environmental degradation their adherents are also wont to. The ecological crisis goes beyond religion, but that is not in any way to exonerate religion, much less to deny the contributions of Christianity in this ecological malaise. Other factors often neglected may also be part of the key

⁴⁹³ Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 260.

to unraveling this crisis. Culture, religion, education, occupation, industrialization, unbridled greed, availability of natural resources, natural disasters, political interests, economic power, corruption, technological advancement, as well as social relationships all contribute in no small measure to the ecological degradation we are grappling with today. Be that as it may, religion can contribute its own quota in remedying the ecological nosedive, but other elements in this crisis have to cease fire for this truce to work.

Furthermore, humanity is being sensitized towards an integral and harmonious ecology that encompasses the various dimensions of our cherished universe, humans, lower animals, plants and the rest of the created world which God declared to be good. We should be kind to animals, to our fellow human beings regardless of gender or creed, as well as to the natural resources which we deplete so fast. Love all as yourself. Such environmental and social ecology cuts across geographical, political, racial and economic boundaries, embracing humanity and creation as one family under God's eternal, transcendent and infinite dominion.

We urge all actors, government, oil companies, citizens, activists, civil and religious leaders, individuals and corporate bodies to recognize the urgency to preserve creation and conserve non-renewable resources. Care for our common home is a natural vocation that is binding on us all. Rather than ravishing nature, we are enjoined to promote the flourishing of humanity, creation and all life forms.

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